DESIGNING WOMEN:
LEARNING FROM FEMINIST LEGACIES AND THE WOMEN-IN-GAMES MOVMENT

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To Billy and Mabel

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SUMMARY

In 2019 the video games industry was rocked by a slew of high-profile sexual harassment and assault allegations that some called the #MeToo movement of the games world, but to many these revelations came as no surprise. From the 2004 EA Spouse controversy to the 2014 #Gamergate harassment campaign the games industry has long been known for harboring an at times toxic atmosphere of exploitation and discrimination.

This project looks at a handful of Women-In-Games organizations that set out to change the experience of women in the industry by helping newcomers to gain high tech skills and to supporting early career professionals through mentorship and community building. Along the way, it combines the study of these Women-In-Games organizations with a years-long collaboration bringing video games to the US' oldest feminist bookstore, Charis Books & More in Atlanta, GA.

Through examining the work and values of two types of organizations devoted to women's equality, one a historic feminist movement-building space and the others, contemporary interventions into the professional games and tech industry, this study asks the questions "What can the Women-In-Games movement learn from the rich history of feminist organizing at spaces like Charis?" "Can games play a part in feminist movement building?" and "What does the future of feminist organizing look like in the games industry?”

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Coming to This Work

Originally trained as a fine artist during my undergraduate studies at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston and Tufts University, I first entered the world of games in 2009 while as an educator of children and teens in New York City when I began working with nonprofits such the Institute of Play (Wan, 2019) and youth development organization Global Kids (*Global Kids*, n.d.) on education initiatives at the forefront of so called "games based learning" (Prensky, 2001). Becoming interested in game design as an creative practice and a pedagogical tool, I immersed myself in the social, creative and professional community of game designers in New York City helping out with events at the then fledgling DIY arcade Babycastles (Pasternack, 2011) and attending public events held by the NYU Game Center, NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Program and Parson's School of Design's Design and Technology MFA Program.

In 2011, I enrolled in graduate school at NYU's Polytechnic Institute (now NYU's Tandon School of Engineering) to study games and became even more intertwined with the research and design community around games in NYC. However, throughout these early years in the local games community, one thing was becoming clear to me, the culture around games in New York was not particularly diverse, even within a hugely diverse and multicultural city, and notably women were almost absent from it. There were female role models in my program at NYU such as the inimitable Dr. Katherine Isbister and at Parson's where Colleen Macklin and Dr. Katie Salen were faculty and I was aware of a few women

games designers in New York such as my mentor Kaho Abe, Naomi Clark and artist Leah Gilliam, yet I could count dozens more professional men in the industry and in academia.

I also frequently found myself the only woman (or one of a very few women) in the room, both when in classes on games at NYU, and while attending public events like lectures by game designers, local game jams, game launches and other related events around the city. There was at times an undercurrent of heterosexism in these spaces, implied in small ways like, sexist jokes, objectifying game content and a lack of games and events created by women among many created by straight, primarily white, cis men. I also observed hostility to conversations about diversity and representation in games in these spaces, when comments by audience members about representations of gender and race were dismissed or skirted by speakers, even though disparities in representation were well documented at the time (D. Williams et al., 2009). This led me to conclude that within at least this small microcosm of games development culture, conversations about the politics of representation were not being given the same discursive weight that I had come to expect based on my studies of art and art history and my experiences being part of communities of fine artists in Boston and New York. I began to study the literature on both representation in games and within game production contexts seeking out more diverse contributors within academia, indie and art games and within the games industry.

Within my local games scene, I also began to recognize the faces of the diverse women I saw regularly at events and started to connect with them. Eventually, this led me to begin organizing games events (lectures and panels) specifically focused on women in the industry and in games studies, first at a local bar in Brooklyn and later at NYU Game Center in collaboration with then-MFA-student, Toni Pizza. Eventually, in 2012, this

evolved into the idea of hosting a conference on the broader issue of diversity as a matter of concern to both to those who design and create games and those who study them as researchers. My collaborators and I wanted to celebrate the work of diverse designers and scholars as well as facilitate a dialogue about the reality of what we saw around us. In 2013, with support from NYU, the Different Games Conference, co-organized by myself and then-doctoral-student Laine Nooney, was launched with help from Toni Pizza and a slew of diverse volunteers, primarily students of game development and game studies as well as early career designers from the local games scene. The conference took place over two days at NYU Polytechnic Institute's Brooklyn campus and drew two hundred attendees, featuring diverse speakers on both game design and game studies and an arcade showcasing games by designers from across the US and beyond. It was through hosting this first iteration of the Different Games Conference that I became aware of the organizers I would later interview for this research project.

Several women traveled from Canada to attend the conference and introduced themselves to me, sharing about their work organizing educational programming and social events for women interested in games in their home cities. Soon a local organization with a similar mission was founded in New York City offering free programming classes to women interested in creating games. After my move to Atlanta in 2013 to attend my PhD program at GA Tech, Different Games Conference grew and evolved over the years into a collaboration between New York City and Atlanta-based organizers and together we founded the Different Games Collective in 2016, a diverse non-hierarchical organization formed to run the conference as well as other events. And over the years, the women I'd met who had formed their own organizations in Canada and New York, and later women

members and students of those organizations, would continue to attend Different Games Conference as speakers, game presenters and audience members. Eventually two Canadian women organizers who were veterans of these organizations joined the Different Games Collective and began to contribute to our organizing work as well.

As someone committed to the work of supporting diverse participation in game development and the culture around games more broadly, through my own work with Different Games, I have watched the growth and evolution of other organizations working towards the same goals with respect and admiration. I've observed the impact they've had firsthand by following the careers of dozens of members, who have gone on to careers in the games industry and academia and who continue these organizing efforts. Many have been my personal friends as well as professional colleagues over the past eight years. My decision to interview leaders in these organizations and study their work is undertaken both out of respect for the important contributions they have made, as well as out of desire to document the existence of these efforts and the practices they've developed. This research project barely scratches the surface of fulfilling that purpose and I hope to be able to continue to bear witness to the work being done by these and other organizers to make games a more diverse and inclusive field.

At the same time, I am committed to asking critical questions, which I myself also grapple with as someone who is afforded the privileges of a white, straight-passing and cis-passing person organizing alongside diverse collaborators. How can I work to center the most marginalized in our organizations and work when I myself occupy a privileged identity and someday soon a privileged professional position? As my knowledge, based on my own identity and experience, will always be partial and situated according to feminist

standpoint theory (Harding, 2004), I must consider the limits my own embodied experience brings to projects devoted to social justice concerns around diversity and inclusion and question this work. I wonder also how organizations like my own (Different Games Collective) and those profiled in my research, can continue to grow and advance their work in a way that reflects the evolution of common understandings of identity and the urgency of calls for greater inclusion. Concepts like intersectionality (which I'll discuss at length in Chapter 2), though not new, were once relatively obscure outside of academia. But as of 2020, such concepts have been well absorbed into popular discourse, complicating common understandings of identity as singular and fixed and necessitating a more nuanced approach to our efforts to improve inclusion and equality.

Working with and learning from a local long-running feminist organization in Atlanta during my graduate studies has brought my early interest in feminist literature, dating back to my high school and college years, and my recent organizing work in games into productive dialogue with one another. My interviews with organizers in games in 2015 and my research into their continued work (conducted online) can't possibly capture the full nuance of how evolving conversations about identity have impacted the work of organizations created with the original purpose of serving women. Nonetheless, it is my hope, as a fellow organizer, that my research on this work, in tandem with research on historic feminist communities who have been navigating the evolving discourse of identity for decades, can offer recommendations with far reaching implications for this area of advocacy and activism. By bringing my research on historic feminist communities into conversation with my research on contemporary organizations founded to support women in games I found there was much that could be incorporated from the tireless work of the

former to help build on the urgent and vital projects whose work is still, by comparison, just beginning. I hope that the ideas I share in my findings can contribute to supporting continued efforts to broaden the diversity of game development and games culture.

1.2 Research Question

To begin the discussion of my research process I'd like to start off by introducing the primary research question that this work addresses, namely "What can Women-in-Games projects learn from historic feminist organizations?" This question seeks to contribute to a specific sub-area of game studies, specifically research which explores the experience of women in the games industry and initiatives focused on supporting women and girls in games. This includes research on educational interventions with school-age girls by the likes of Jen Jenson, Suzanne De Castell and Yasmin Kafai (Jenson & Castell, 2008, 2013; Jenson & De Castell, 2005; Kafai, 1998). It also draws from research on the experience of women in the industry and discrimination in industry spaces including scholarship by Chee et al, Busch et al, Mia Consalvo and TL Taylor (Busch et al., 2016; Chee et al., 2021; N. Taylor Jenson, Jen, de Castell, Suzanne, 2009). However more specifically, this work seeks to contribute new findings to the existing literature on women-in-games of what I'll call "WIG" organizations, most notably by Stephanie Fisher and Allison Harvey, (S. J. Fisher & Harvey, 2012; A. Harvey & Fisher, 2013, 2014), drawing my research on feminist traditions and communities into conversation with the work of WIG organizations and suggesting how the latter can draw powerful inspiration from the former. But before delving into the specifics of my findings, (i.e. how I believe WIG organizations should take heed from historic feminist communities) I want to offer some context about the multiple areas of scholarship from which I drew for this work: the study of Women-In-Games

organizations, the feminist bookstore movement, and the existence of games that can act as feminist movement building tools.

1.3 Women in Games Organizations

In 2019 and 2020 the games industry became the focus of increased public attention due to a slew of sexual harassment and assault allegations involving prominent companies and industry figures (Consalvo, 2012; D'Anastasio, 2018, 2019, 2020; Gurley, 2019; Klepek, 2019; Lorenz & Browning, 2020; Schreier, 2020a). This was viewed to some as a sort #MeToo movement for the games industry (Orr, 2019; Schreier, 2020b), but in reality, conversations about gender and sexism in the industry have been happening for decades and with growing intensity in the 2000s and 2010s (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Gray et al., 2017; Massanari, 2015; Polo, 2012; Purchese, 2013). Within game studies the study of gender and digital games stretches back to the 1990s (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000) and studies of gender in play (Chess, 2012, 2017; Jenson & Castell, 2008; Jenson & De Castell, 2005; Kafai, 2008; N. Taylor et al., 2009), race in play (Brock, 2011; DiSalvo, 2012; Gray, 2012, 2017), sexuality in play (Gray, 2017; Ruberg & Shaw, 2017; Shaw, 2015), as well as gender in game production and industry contexts (Busch et al., 2016; Chee et al., 2021; Consalvo, 2012; S. J. Fisher & Harvey, 2012; A. Harvey & Fisher, 2013, 2014; Orme, 2018) are all ongoing.

While there are many high profile examples of women in the games industry who have faced online harassment in recent memory such as Jade Raymond (Crecente, 2015) and Jennifer Hepler (Amini, 2012), perhaps no harassment phenomena has had a bigger impact on the games industry as the 2014 controversy known as #GamerGate, a targeted online

harassment campaign against a handful of prominent women in the games industry involving thousands of participants who coordinated using anonymous online message boards (Wagner, 2014). #GamerGate culminated in not only rape and death threats against its victims but also incidents of doxxing, swatting (Gray et al., 2017; Hern, 2015) and in one bizarre incident, threats of terrorism against Utah State University over a planned speaking appearance by a gamergate victim (Utah State University, 2014). Put in this context, the 2019 and 2020 harassment allegations speak to a longstanding pattern of discrimination against women in the industry who despite a more than threefold increase over the past decade (from 6% in 2009) still only make up 20% of the Global games industry despite making up a full 50% of the game player population (Caddy, 2020; womeningames.org, n.d.). In response to this well documented phenomena of women being both underrepresented in the games industry and in some cases subjected to harassment and other forms of sexist discrimination (Caddy, 2020), dozens of initiatives have been organized over the past decade to support and encourage women professionals in the games industry, whether in the form of local meet-up groups, annual scholarships, industry mentorship programs, game development classes, bootcamps, and incubator programs.

In my research I studied three examples of these projects, which I call "Women-In Games" or WIG organizations, all of which are non-profits that have existed since between 2012 and 2013. I borrow the term and abbreviation "WIG" from Allison Harvey and Stephanie Fisher's use (A. Harvey & Fisher, 2014) although its bears noting that Harvey and Fisher make a distinction between organizations that work specifically with women already in the industry, whom they term WIGs versus "incubator" programs which are

aimed at training women, not already in the games industry, as first-time game-makers (Harvey & Fisher, 2014, p.577). While the organizations I profile in this chapter might offer public programming that aligns them with Harvey and Fisher's "incubator" definition, my research leads me to believe that their efforts to connect women to the games industry (through programs like professional mentorships, networking events and more) is strong enough to warrant being categorized alongside native industry efforts. Thus, I choose to use the term WIG for both types of organizations. WIGs are part of a broader movement of what I call "games advocacy organizations" which I define as professional and social organizations within game development, fan culture and sometimes academia (there is broad overlap in this space between industry, academic and player facing events) whose primary goal is to address the needs or promote the inclusion of a specific group in relation to the culture or business of digital games. Games advocacy organizations focus on projects such as scholarship programs, educational programming, conferences, conventions, or other public events and/or other advocacy efforts like social media awareness raising campaigns. These organizations serve a community building function amongst those who share a common identity or experience and are part of the games industry or fan and player communities. There are for example, organizations in games specific to promoting the work of game developers of color (Chan, 2017; Jackson, 2018; Kindred & Koebler, 2018; Minor, 2018), serving the needs of disabled players (*The AbleGamers Charity | The Worlds Largest Charity for Gamers with Disabilities.*, n.d.), promoting the work of queer designers and academics (Ruberg 2015), and of LGBTQ+ players (*About Us – GaymerX*, n.d.), or promoting diversity broadly (*Different Games Collective*, n.d.; *I Need Diverse Games*, n.d.). The work of these organizations represents

an interventionist reaction (S. J. Fisher & Harvey, 2012) to a well-documented history of exclusion within the cultures of both game development and fandom (S. Fisher & Jenson, 2017; Jenson & Castell, 2013; Jessica, n.d.; Salter & Blodgett, 2012; N. Taylor et al., 2009).

My research specifically focused on three WIG organizations, based in the cities of Montreal, Toronto and New York. They cater to their local communities by offering free or low-cost public programming including classes, bootcamps and incubator programs on creating games, events for meeting other game makers and opportunities to receive mentorship from professionals in the industry. Through my research on these organizations and my analysis of their organizational practices, I arrived at an understanding of the underlying values they hold and how they enact them day to day.

1.4 The Feminist Bookstore Movement

In parallel with my research on these WIG organizations I also undertook a multiyear collaboration with Charis Book's and More of Atlanta, which centered on bringing videogames to the historic feminist bookstore. The feminist bookstore movement in North America dates back to the early 1970s when feminists began creating bookstores to cater to growing interest in feminist literature and to support the growing "women in print" movement which sought to increase the publication and availability of books by women authors (K. Hogan, 2003, 2008, 2016). These bookstores had far reaching impacts as they not only supplied feminist literature but acted as movement spaces that helped to build feminist communities through activism and consciousness raising or acting as a "women's resource center disguised as a bookstore" (Hogan, pg. 30). Historians credit feminist bookstores with playing a central role in the establishment of the fields of gender

and women's studies within the academy for the way they helped to establish and make visible a feminist cannon (Mantilla & Mercurio, 2007; Onosaka, 2013). At their peak in the 1990s, there were 150 feminist bookstores in North America(Hogan, 2003), but the rise of online retail decimated their numbers alongside other independent bookstores. Currently around a dozen remain, of which Charis is the oldest at 47 years old (Enjeti, 2014).

At Charis, I worked with staff and other collaborators to bring videogames to the bookstore in the form of a public programming series we called "Dear Games" which featured events like workshops and talks on video games as well as the installation of a full-scale arcade cabinet. Through my collaboration with Charis, I studied how the organization expressed its feminist values through its day to day practices and through the way it interfaces with the local feminist community.

1.5 Games As Feminist Organizing Tools

In chapter four I analyze a set of three independent video games for the way in which their design allows players to enact various forms of accountability practices developed by feminist activists. My work here on the way feminist practices of accountability can be embedded in the design of digital games and create the conditions for enacting feminist values through play is most closely related to but distinct from major contributors to game studies such as Bogost (Bogost, 2010) whose concept of "procedural rhetoric" argues for games as persuasive systems capable of conveying rhetorical arguments, Flanagan (Flanagan, 2013) who explores games as the critical tools of artists and activists and Flanagan and Nussenbaum (Flanagan & Nussenbaum, 2014) who argue for game systems as embodiments of human values. By contrast I argue that designed

digital experiences like games are capable of taking on some of the processes of expending pedagogical and emotional labor undertaken by feminist communities in facilitating social practices like feminist accountability, and can thus act as a means to extend the movement building work of feminist organizers in which they put feminist theory into practice to realize feminist values. Now that I've offered some context on my topic areas, I'd like to return to my research question of what WIG projects can learn from historic feminist organizations and share my findings.

1.6 Research Findings

I had two key takeaways from my research, which are first, that due to the complex nature of discrimination and inequality both in the games industry and in society as a whole, WIG organizations need to follow the lead of organizations like Charis in embracing an intersectional understanding of identity and to stop centering gender as the primary axis of oppression they seek to resist. This means incorporating an understanding of the way that race, class, disability, and diverse gender identities all impact the experience of professionals in games.

Second, if WIG organizations want to improve the games industry they need to harness their organizational platforms to do more than train and professionalize members for roles in the industry and instead work to build feminist coalition amongst diverse community members that can challenge oppression more broadly through advocacy and activist work. Thus, coming back to this notion of 'women's resource centers disguised as bookstores', I am arguing that these projects need to act as feminist movement building spaces, disguised as games and coding bootcamps.

One of the exciting things that my research revealed, is that some of these changes are actually already in the process of coming about in the WIG organizations I profiled. In the case of one organization in particular, which I will refer to as Girl Made Games, the organization is already acting as a politically engaged feminist community building space, disguised as a WIG project.

CHAPTER 2. WOMEN-IN-GAMES ORGANIZATIONS

In this chapter I detail my research on WIG organizations *Girl Made Games*, *Code Federation*, and *Voxelles*, which pays particular attention to the practices of these organizations as a means to discern the underlying values of these organizations. While there is a rich and complex body of literature on values in the design of ICTs within the field of human computer interaction on the framework of *values sensitive design* (Friedman, 1996) in my use of the term "values" I draw upon the definition offered by Flanagan et al. in " Embodying Values in Technology" a chapter which takes as its case study the development of educational game RAPUNSEL as an technological system that expresses human values. Values are described as:

> …purposes, ends, or goals of human action and our intention to focus on those that are generally construed as social, moral, and political, including in this wide-ranging category abstract values such as freedom, autonomy, equality, justice, equality, democracy, and privacy, as well as more concrete ones such as friendship, safety, sociality, and comfort. (Flanagan et al., 2008, pg. 325)

While the abstract values I highlight in this chapter are in some cases different than those mentioned by Flanagan et al., they are similarly wide-ranging and also broadly construed as "social, moral and political."

2.1 Methods

To better understand the values of these three WIG organizations and how they were articulated through organizational practices, interviews were conducted with two

organizers each from the three organizations. While the type of programming offered by these three organizations differed slightly, all shared a common mission based on providing self-identified women with volunteer-lead, free or low-cost hands-on learning experiences with game-making tools as a way to increase diverse participation in the field of game development. Effectively, all three organizations were focused primarily on teaching women, and in particular those without prior programming experience, how to become game-makers.

Among the three organizations profiled, Toronto-based *Girl Made Games* was the oldest, having existed since March of 2012, while New York City-based *Code Federation* and Montreal-based *Voxelles* were both founded in 2013. Three of the six women interviewed are co-founders of their organizations: one member of Code Federation and the two co-founders of Voxelles. The other three women interviewed were former members of the groups they now run; i.e. they had learned to make games as participants in classes run by their current organization before eventually joining its leadership structure. Both of the interviewees from Girl Made Games and one from Code Federation are alumni. Additionally, one of the cofounders of Voxelles had learned in a similar, pre-existing Toronto-based program she participated in which is no longer in existence.

As a participant in the independent game development community in the US for approximately ten years, five out of six interview subjects are professional acquaintances of mine. Additionally, through my experience organizing inclusive game design events (including conferences, public lecture series' and classes) I have interacted with the organizations profiled in various ways throughout the years. For instance, four out of six interviewees had participated in one or more of the events I contributed to organizing. I am

also aware of the work of these organizers. Further, I have observed presentations and participated in workshops led by organizations profiled at such conferences as the annual Game Developers Conference and Queerness in Games Conference. In the case of Code Federation, I was a participant observer at their events on four separate occasions for a total of approximately ten hours. I have attended one workshop hosted by Voxelles for a total of two hours, I have made multiple visits to the headquarters of Girl Made Games Toronto and attended two social events held there for a total of approximately four hours.

A total of six semi-structured interviews conducted over video-chat, ranging from 30-75 minutes in length, were completed with two representatives from each of the three organizations (six women in total). My questions focused on understanding the goals and methods behind each organization's educational programming and the local context (be it social or professional) that lead to their group's formation and guided their operating decisions. The interviews were then transcribed from digital audio recordings into text and the data was analyzed using open coding to identify themes that emerged across the interviews with members from each of the three organizations. Related quotes and passages were noted and later analyzed closely to arrive at findings.

2.2 Findings: Organizational Values

Through coding the interviews with the representatives from these three organizations, I found many commonalities in the underlying motivations for their common goal of supporting women in becoming game-makers, as well as the practical methods their organizations used to deliver educational content and other forms of support.

In reviewing the themes, four core values emerged related to the work of all three organizations: accessibility, safety, empowerment, and community.

2.2.1 Accessibility

Accessibility is a value shared by all three organizations and manifests in both the economic models of their organizations as well as their approaches to technology in game development workshops. While Girl Made Games utilizes a member-based subscription model for access to programming, their fee is kept low ($10 CAD per month) and they offer sliding scale (pay what you can) pricing for those in need (*Dames Making Games: Become a Member of DMG Toronto*, n.d.). Voxelles and Code Federation were also cognizant of providing programming where cost would not be prohibitive. Their programming ranged from free to low cost, including similar sliding scale options to keep classes accessible for those experiencing financial hardship.

The choice of which game-making tools to teach to aspiring developers in workshops offered another insight into how the value of accessibility, in this case, technological and financial accessibility, guided the practices of all three organizations. While all organizations offered some amount of training to intermediate developers using free but technologically sophisticated industry-standard (i.e. Unity 3D game engine), organizers cited the importance of teaching first-time game makers with free, but highly accessible, user-friendly, and in some cases open-source, game creation tools such as the creative coding platform Processing, hypertext authoring tool Twine, and 2D game development tools like Construct 2 and Stencyl.

While these accessible tools may not easily lend themselves to the creation of games that look and feel similar to those available commercially, women from all three organizations stressed that a lot of the work they do as mentors and educators is managing expectations. They aim to strike a balance between encouraging women to experiment and learn while keeping them within a realistic scope given the time and expertise they have. "Its not about making a perfect game", one of the GMG organizers explained, "it's more about making people know that they can do it."

2.2.2 Safety, i.e. Providing Women-Only "Safe-Space" as an Intervention

Another common theme amongst the women interviewed is a shared experience of having witnessed or experienced gender-based discrimination in professional settings related to games and technology, and an overall perception that the professional culture of the tech world was unsupportive and alienating in ways that were both subtle and due to overt discrimination. All of the organizers described the need for "safe" spaces in which women could learn, describing spaces free of not only gender-based discrimination but also from workplace competition or professional intimidation.

What might constitute a safer space and how gender should determine participation in spaces of empowerment for women varied however (at least initially), by organization. While all three organizations are cognizant of trans inclusion and understand trans women to be as much a target of their work as cis women, they each struggled in different ways to reconcile their mission of primarily serving those who identified as women with a desire to extend support to other marginalized gender identities such as non-binary persons and trans men. Voxelles, for example, offers some events that are open to all genders and

sometimes had men lead workshops. Code Federation, on the other hand, had recently lost a favorite volunteer. After coming our as a trans man and beginning their transition, the volunteer no longer felt it was appropriate to lead classes intended to be led by women.

Given that all of my interview subjects described having negative experiences in professionalized tech and games industry spaces, their decision to create inclusive women-centered community spaces can be seen as an intervention designed to empower women as technologists. By lowering the technological and financial barriers, these events and classes create a "safe space to fail" and a learning environment that is different from the often-inhospitable environment of "start-up" culture and other manifestations of masculinist computing culture. Participation in women-centered events, such as monthly socials, provides a supportive space for women to workshop their ideas beside their peers, building the confidence to take their work to the next professional level.

The appropriate role that men should play in organizational projects dedicated to women's empowerment was practical consideration that varied amongst these organizations. While one organization, Voxelles, offered events that were (with some exceptions) co-ed and open to men, the other two organizations aimed explicitly to create women-only learning spaces. Whether men should lead classes was also a contested issue. Two organizations allowed men (specifically those with professional expertise) to propose workshops or volunteer their time as teachers or mentors. While the other, chose specifically to utilize only women instructors, with the goal of motivating its women-only participants through exposure to accomplished women who might inspire them as role-models or mentors.

2.2.3 Empowerment

One of the ways that participants in women-centered games organizations are resisting gendered exclusion in the field is by claiming themselves as game designers. They choose to actively frame their participation in the practice of game design as legitimate without regards to the technologies they choose or attempts to prove "mastery" of them. For some it's a revelation when they hear, as one organizer and former participant recalls being told early on, that "You don't have to have any coding experience or background in programming in order to know how to make a game." which she cites as a pivotal moment in deciding to join her first game jam. Although identifying as a game designer is not required of participants (some of the women interviewed considered themselves "artists," "designers," and "creative technologists") there was an insistence on claiming the practice of "game design" which many without formal training in computer science see as an inaccessible skill or professional practice. Crucially, organizers within these educational initiatives strive to support women in accomplishing their design goals by helping them to be realistic about scope while still affirming their right to claim of the title "game designer".

As one organizer from Girl Made Games explained, rather than focusing on creating a market ready product "It's helping people find tools that make them feel empowered and make them feel like they can really find their voice." Describing her experience as a participant in Girl Made Games (before becoming an organizer) she related that the first game she made as part of a weekend game jam, was actually just a character moving on a screen, but in the supportive context of the Girl Made Games community she still felt proud and accomplished:

”... It was a very empowering experience, in 48 hours I was surrounded by people who made entire games from scratch from beginning to end. I was like ‘I made my character do one thing!’ What was really great about it was that everybody was really supportive and encouraging, it felt like I had accomplished a lot, even though looking back at it now, I'm like ‘That was kind of ridiculous’.’’

2.2.4 Community

While not all of the organizations felt that mentorship needed to be gender-specific, the creation of social-support networks comprised of peers and professional mentors was a goal shared by Voxelles, Girl Made Games, and Code Federation. Organizers expressed the importance of encouragement and guidance from those with professional experience for supporting the careers ambitions of emerging game-makers but also the need for those in their early careers to build relationships with other learners who would make appropriate and willing collaborators on creative or professional game projects.

In addition to acquiring skills these organizations allow women to build networks of colleagues and friends with complimentary skills and interests. By forging friendships as members of organizations like Girl Made Games, Code Federation and Voxelles they gain peers and future creative collaborators with whom they can continue to collaborate outside of women-centered spaces. The respondents who had participated in these initiatives before becoming leaders of them said they found later that the networks they forged as students continued to offer connections that can yield jobs and opportunities that their technical skills bolster.

2.3 Conclusion

Analyzing my interviews with these six women, learning more about their day to day experiences as organizers and facilitators of WIG organizations, I developed an understanding of the values underlying the organizational practices these three projects aimed at supporting women in becoming creators of digital games. Having gained an understanding of the way these values were expressed through the work of these WIG organizations formed a foundation on which I was able to draw when I worked with a Charis Books & More to deliver our own public programming on digital games. A feminist bookstore located in Decatur, GA, Charis provided a different context in which to undertake the work of supporting "women in games" and others. The context of Charis in turn, emphasized different values and required different practices than those I learned of from the WIG organizers. Understanding the differences between the values of WIG organizations and historic feminist organizations informed my research activities with Charis.

CHAPTER 3. BRINGING GAMES TO CHARIS, ATLANTA'S FEMINIST BOOKSTORE

3.1 Introduction

To understand the values and practices embedded within a comparable but different organization from the WIG organizations I worked collaboratively with several members of Different Games, a collective games organization of which I am a part. Together we founded a partnership with local feminist bookstore Charis Books & More to program a series of games-focused community events as well as install an arcade cabinet to present feminist games within the physical space of the bookstore. A collaborative approach was taken to both the design of the arcade cabinet and the creation of a public programming series for the Charis community, to allow the values of the community to be revealed through the process of collaboration undertaken between the Different Games Members and the community at Charis Books.

3.2 Background

Founded in 1974, Charis Books & More is not only Atlanta's only feminist bookstore but has for years been the oldest remaining feminist bookstore in the United States. Charis represents an early example of what author Kristen Hogan calls "the feminist bookstore movement" (Enjeti, 2014; Hogan, 2016). While in its early years the store focused on providing literature on radical spirituality, it was always a space focused on promoting women's voices and specialized in providing access to work by diverse women and later feminist and LGBTQIA authors. The space has been a mainstay of the local lesbian

feminist community of Atlanta's Little Five Points neighborhood since its founding 45 years ago. (Chesnut et al., 2009).

3.3 Methods

Inquiry into feminist values (with the term "values" again being understood according to Flanagan et al.'s definition) at Charis was undertaken over several years of collaboration with key figures in the community, most principally the executive director of Charis' Circle (the bookstore's non-profit programming arm) ER Anderson. The collaboration began in the Fall of 2014, with the goal of creating a freestanding arcade cabinet for the bookstore. Meetings were held between myself as a participant-researcher along with other non-Charis participants and Anderson to discuss the logistics of bringing a cabinet to the bookstore. A name "Dear Games" was chosen for the project to distinguish it as an endeavor not belonging solely to Charis, or to either Georgia Tech or the Different Games Collective (the institution and organization with which the non-Charis volunteers were affiliated).

Through these meetings a first unveiling of the collaboration was chosen for inclusion at Charis' 40th birthday celebration and fundraising party, a gala style event at a historic house in the Little Five Points neighborhood. I created zines and posters to announce the new project to attendees and desktop computers were set up on tabletops around one corner of the event space, displaying games for passersby to play, including titles by women developers such as Anna Anthropy, Nina Freeman and Mattie Brice.

While the games attracted a lot of interest at the event, we also found community members were frequently surprised and confused by the prospect of feminist video games,

and many older generation community members were intimidated by the technology. As a result, it was decided that more context was needed to introduce the project to the community. The goal of the project was then refocused to include the creation of public programming for the Charis community on topics relating to videogames and feminist concerns as preparations were made to introduce the cabinet into the space.

Ultimately it took just under two years for the cabinet to go from initial planning to installation at the bookstore, and a total of six events were held at the store before the arrival of the cabinet, followed by another six events at Charis after it was placed in the space. In the case of each of the events I attended as a participant observer and in some cases either facilitated or co-facilitated the events with ER Anderson and other Dear Games volunteers. As such my findings are drawn from analyzing data collected during event observation as well as documentation of events created by attendees such as photos shared on social media and shared resource docs created by the group and captured by ER, myself or other facilitators. Analysis was also conducted on Charis' social media channels and website as well as on local media coverage of the store, its history and various projects.

Programming included talks on contemporary issues in games and gaming beginning with a kickoff event in late January 2015 titled "Dear Games: A Feminist Video Game Primer". The event, which opened with a lecture on the history of games that engaged with explicitly feminist themes, had a particular focus on contemporary independent video games such as those sometimes referred to as the "queer avant garde" of video games (Keogh, 2013). This first bookstore event, like many that would follow, was planned through collaboration with ER Anderson in which a previous event (the unveiling of the project at Charis' 40th birthday) was discussed and a plan for next steps

was created to reflect the needs of the bookstore community that we identified. In one case, after discovering through conversation with community stakeholders like bookstore patrons and longtime collaborators, that not all community members were familiar with the concept of games as a form of feminist media, akin to feminist literature or visual art, an event was created specifically to target the topic. Responding to the community's questions, interests and needs is in fact a key way that Charis organizers express the store's feminist values, as I'll discuss further in my findings section. Thus, this first event proved to be a model for planning moving forward.

Of the events held in the bookstore space, roughly half took the form of "talks" presenting a speaker or speaker panel and of discussion groups on various topics related to games and feminism or social justice more broadly. On another three occasions beyond the dozen events at the bookstore, organizers of the project, including myself, Michael Vogel and Simon Del Rosario represented Dear Games at other local cultural events such as the Atlanta Zine Fest, Ladyfest Atlanta and Terminus Atlanta to raise the profile of the collaboration within the creative community of Atlanta and attract new participants.

Two of the twelve events held at Charis books were workshops where attendees learned to make their own videogames using accessible tools for non-programmers. The first, titled "Dear Games: Learning to make your First Adventure Game or Interactive Fiction with Twine!" focused on creating games and stories with Twine, a simple hypertext tool for creating "interactive, nonlinear stories" (*Twine / An Open-Source Tool for Telling Interactive, Nonlinear Stories*, n.d.). The second game-making event "Dear Games: A Feminist Video Game Collaboration: Making Tiny Games Workshop" utilized Flickgame, a browser-based tool by independent game and game-engine creator Steven Lavelle, which

allows users to create simple "point and click" style adventure games (*Flickgame.Org*, n.d.; *Stephen Lavelle Is Creating Computer Games | Patreon*, n.d.)

Finally, four events were planned around presenting specific books or games to the Charis community, with their authors/creators appearing in person or via video conferencing as event participants. On two occasions author readings were presented to celebrate the release of new books of scholarship on games that related to the interests of the Charis community. These events, which were in keeping with Charis' regular programming for book releases included a reading by Dr. Adrienne Shaw from her monograph *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* and by Dr. Shira Chess' from *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity* with audience discussions following. At two other events game makers Mattie Brice and Nina Freeman respectively were invited to join audience members, remotely over live video, for question and answer sessions on their work as part of celebrations for the "launch" of their games on the Charis arcade cabinet. Mattie Brice's appearance coincided with the presentation of her game *Mainichi* and Nina Freeman's with the launch of a small collection of her vignette-style games titled "Nina Says So" which was curated by a group of undergraduate students from Georgia Tech's Computational Media program.

3.4 Findings: Values in Practice

To arrive at a set of values characterized by Charis' organizational practices I analyzed a number of different source materials to arrive at findings. This included analyzing my observational data from several years of events at Charis in which I took part as both a facilitator and a participant observer, as well as analyzing the store's website and

social media presence. I also drew from local press coverage documenting events at the store and two online articles documenting the stores founding and decades long history as an Atlanta feminist institution. Here I share the values that found underlying Charis' organizational practices as well as the way they manifested in this particular feminist community.

3.4.1 Financial Accessibility and Challenging Capitalism

Stores, such as Charis, may operate as capitalist enterprises but differ from ordinary businesses in two important ways. Firstly, the approach that feminist bookstores take to business practices have historically been a means of activism in and of themselves and continue to be at Charis. Secondly, the role that feminist bookstores play as movement-building spaces extends far beyond that of a typical business. In the case of our work with Dear Games at Charis, commitment to challenging capitalism also manifested in important ways that impacted the nature of the programming we offered, and the design of our arcade cabinet as I'll detail below.

As Kristan Hogan's history documents, challenging capitalism has been an essential feature of the feminist bookstore movement, with feminist bookstores adapting their own business practices to resist the capitalism of what many in the movement called the "Literary Industrial Corporate Establishment" or LICE (42), such as ordering titles from a far greater number and diversity of book suppliers, in one case 2,000 to the average bookstore's 200 (64) and systematically coordinating letter writing campaigns to publishers to get out of print books reissued (51). As a member of this tradition of literary activism Charis is no exception. As Chesnut, Gable and Anderson have written of Charis'

history, this commitment to promoting the work of marginalized authors has direct implications in the context of the current publishing and literary retail world,

> "…independents order in small quantities, allowing them to support small presses and self-published authors whose books might not otherwise ever see the light of day. A big part of how Charis continues to live its feminism is through the books it carries, seeking to bring the marginalized or forgotten voices to the center and to places of prominence on its shelves." (Chesnut, Gable, and Anderson 2009)

Just as Charis prides itself on being a space that supports the work of marginalized writers, stocking small press books as a means of empowering voices that might otherwise not be heard, the cabinet we created for Charis was designed specifically to be a home to small independent games, often created by a small team, if not a single designer. Because of the way that women have historically been underrepresented within professional game development as well as within games themselves (D. Williams et al., 2009), we intentionally curated the games in the cabinet to be both authored by women and focused topically on exploring the perspectives and experiences of women and girls. Unlike a traditional arcade cabinet though, our cabinet presented games that were for the most part available for free online, created by designers as works of individual expression, rather than commercial projects. In keeping both with the creators' intent to share their works freely and the inclusive and financially accessible ethics of Charis, the cabinet was set up as "free-to-play" with the space in the cabinet for installing a coin-op mechanism for accepting money left empty.

In addition to different business practices, Charis' commitment to being financially accessible to the community is also expressed in the ways the space is extended as a resource beyond being a place for just buying. This is intentionally maintained through a dual bottom-line business structure, established in 1996, whereby Charis as a store exists as a separate business from Charis Circle, the non-profit programming arm which occupies the same space as the physical bookstore (Bryant, 2009). Through its public programming the store has a distinct focus on presenting not just books for sale but acting as a venue for the sharing of stories. Events are devoted not only to published books but also community expression through writing, an orientation to literature which is quite different from that of a typical bookstore.

In addition to traditional author talks from published writers whose works are relevant to the store's focus on feminism and social justice, the space offers community members multiple ways to interact with books and literature and is host to frequent writing workshops such as its reoccurring event "Making Space: A Community Writing Group for Activists, Healers, and Every Day Heroes" and monthly open-mic nights where anyone is invited to share their poetry or other written work. Because of Charis' focus on being a space for personal expression and storytelling, games seemed like a natural fit to Anderson when we first approached Charis about the Dear Games collaboration. Games were, to Anderson, another storytelling medium through which the Charis community could express itself and a form of technology closely related to literature because of their usefulness for storytelling. As such, the exhibition of games on our arcade cabinet, workshops on creating games and discussion groups related to games were a natural fit for

the programming at the bookstore which is focused on empowering those who enjoy stories as well as those who write them.

When creating Dear Games programming in conjunction with Charis, anti-capitalist positions impacted the design of events in several ways that reflected the specific context of the bookstore, highlighted the differences between the nature of our collaboration with a historic feminist organization, and the WIG organizations that had initially informed it. For example, Charis is an organization directly tied not to members of a professional community (such as games development or tech), but to many local communities engaged in work around social change issues, thus there was no imperative for our programming to include a focus on professionalization for participants. While WIG organizations share certain organizational goals with Charis, namely a focus on empowering women's voices and providing resources, professionalization is as much a component of empowerment as community building in organizations like Girl Made Games, Voxelles and Code Federation.

By contrast, Charis is an institution without ties to a particular industry, where programming instead reflects the distinctly anti-capitalist concerns of activists with "social justice programs focusing on topics as wide-ranging as trans-health, lesbians and aging, urban farming, disability activism, queer parenting, "stories for free children" story hour, anti-racist discussion groups and much more" (Chesnut et al., 2009). Unlike events held by Girl Made Games, which operates on paid membership basis, events at Charis were, like the games on the arcade cabinet, offered at no cost to participants, with just a basket passed at some point during the event to collect voluntary donations from attendees. As with all events at Charis, this practice represents the way in which Charis makes itself a resource

to the community rather than simply a business, or to quote Hogan's history of feminist bookstores "a women's resource center disguised as a bookstore" (p.30). With that in mind, we chose to create Dear Games events that engaged with participants as players, critics or creators rather than with aspirations towards a career or towards commercial endeavors as one might in a typical WIG organization.

Finally, being oriented away from commercialization and professionalization within the games industry also impacted our choice in technology when designing workshops. In both of the game-making events we ran the tools we chose to teach, Twine and Flickgame were intentionally chosen because they are free, easily accessed online, and lend themselves to self-publishing. While the workshops did not equip participants to create commercial games, they did allow first time users of these technologies to easily create and share their own stories on the spot, lending an immediacy that felt in keeping with Charis focus on empowering new voices to be heard.

3.4.2 Anti-racism

Anti-racism is a value practiced in myriad fundamental ways at Charis Books. As an organization which, according to its statement of mission and vision, both "works for social justice" and "encourages the expression of diverse and marginalized voices" Charis centers women of color through direct representation on its board positions and store staff as well as on its shelves where authors of color are prominently featured. The store's children's book section offers a collection of board and picture books featuring diverse representation for early readers to the extent that the store is a known resource for parents seeking out diverse children's literature (*Children's & Teen's Booklists | Charis Books &*

More and Charis Circle, n.d.). As an organization focused on amplifying the work of diverse authors, the store's public programming is another venue through which writers of color are featured, through regular reading events by diverse authors as well as reoccurring monthly events like meetings of the store's "Black Feminist Book Club". Anti-racism is not only approached with a strategy of direct representation though by the Charis community (and on the store's shelves and monthly event calendar) but as an active process of resisting racism and white supremacy which must necessarily be practiced by white community members alongside people of color.

The work of anti-racism as a responsibility of white community members is a theme of store programming such as the monthly discussions held by its "Race Conscious Parenting Collective". As Anderson says of the group's formation after the 2016 death of Philando Castille at the hands of police, "We heard from the people of color in our community that one of the ways that white people could be helpful and useful was to work on our internal white supremacy in our families and our communities," in response to this feedback a group formed specifically to focus on supporting (primarily) white parents as they navigate issues of race and privilege with their children and has been meeting monthly for more than two years, regularly drawing between twenty and forty participants (Shelia M. Poole, 2019).

Charis also employs a strategy cited in Kristan Hogan's history of the feminist bookstore movement as a particularly powerful approach amongst feminist bookstores historically, compiling and sharing booklists as a tool of feminist movement building.

Hogan calls this broader project of list-building "The Feminist Shelf" and says of the practice:

> "Lists were one forum through which feminist bookwomen taught readers, including each other, to read feminist literature and, in turn, to become literary activists. With these lists… feminist bookwomen put books in conversation with each other, demonstrated the existence of a field of knowledge, and mapped new vocabularies for understanding feminist literature" (2016, p. 111).

While Hogan's "Feminist Shelf" existed in an era before the internet as we know it today, Charis uses its web presence as a site for sharing feminist knowledge in tandem with its physical space and its work on anti-racist alliance building is reflected in the book lists shared on its website. Those that directly address issues connected to race and racism include "Understanding and Dismantling Racism: A Booklist for White Readers" and "Books to Teach White Children and Teens How to Undo Racism and White Supremacy". Charis' "feminist shelf" can even act as a venue for addressing current events of concern to the community as demonstrated by lists titled "Books we recommend after the George Zimmerman verdict" and recently a "Booklist About the U.S. Border Crisis" which includes a list of immigrant advocacy organizations that readers can support.

One powerful instance in which evidence of the Charis' community's anti-racist political commitments was revealed naturally by the Dear Games collaboration was in the case of a discussion group that was created to allow community members to weigh in on the phenomena of *Pokémon Go* which was then taking the country, including Atlanta, by storm. The event, titled "The Politics of *Pokémon Go*: A Group Discussion for Bystanders,

Players, Critics and Fans" brought together a diverse group of discussants, some of whom were younger folks who had grown up on the Pokémon franchise as well as others who represented older generations at Charis and had not yet played the game. While not everyone at the event was equally familiar with the technology, the consensus of the group was concern for the sociocultural implications of the game as had been captured in the recent media coverage since its release. As my recap (shared to the event's facebook page) captured, participants were concerned with not only the way the placement of in-game landmarks impacted culturally sensitive spaces like museums and memorials, but also the way that they reflected "divisions of race and class within communities" across Atlanta, a city whose socioeconomic divisions were well known to participants (Feldman, 2016; Kooragayala & Srini, 2016).

The right to use public space for play was also discussed in terms of the way that police violence disparately impacted white players and people of color, given that the game's US release had come just a day before the police shooting death of Philando Castile and its livestreamed aftermath shocked the nation, including the members of the Atlanta activist community represented at the event (Domonoske & Chappell, 2016; Webster, 2017). Attendees wondered about the game's relative safety for players of different races (Akil, 2016) but also spoke about their personal experiences using the game as a tool for pushing back against the impact of racialized violence, such as "…enjoying the game as a form of self-care given all the recent violence that folks are trying to process." While discussing the recent Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the city of Atlanta, for example, we addressed the ethics of playing the game while protesting. One attendee, a person of color, related having used the app during marches as a way to manage what was otherwise

a painful and emotionally exhausting experience while I shared that, as a white woman, I felt an obligation to put down the app after arriving at a protest as a sign of respect as someone not subject to the same racialized violence as others who were present.

The event closed with a demonstration of the game for members of the community who had never played before and younger attendees shared their devices to allow elders to catch Pokémon among the bookshelves. While it was of course the individuals who attended the event that made for such a nuanced discussion about Pokémon Go it is also in a way emblematic of the kind of space that Charis provides for the community. As a space steeped in activist culture where anti-racism is a foundational value, even an event about a mobile game is likely to elicit a conversation that reflects the seriousness and complexity of issues like police violence and racism.

3.4.3 LGBTQ and Specifically Trans Rights

In addition to being a longstanding hub of the queer community in Atlanta, Charis articulates a commitment to supporting trans rights as one of its values through its support of trans literature and trans authors as well as through public programming that supports trans community members. Literary events relevant to trans-inclusion in the bookstore's programming include a celebration of trans advocate and author Samantha Allen as part of the 2019 Decatur Book Festival, an evening with prominent gender-nonconforming activist and author Jacob Tobia on the occasion of the release of their memoir *Sissy: A Coming-of-Gender Story* and a book release party for the *Queer and Transgender Resilience Workbook* by author Anneliese Singh (*Celebrating Samantha Allen and the LGBTQ Authors of the Decatur*, n.d.; *Queer and Trans Resilience Skills with Anneliese Singh!*, n.d.; *Sissy: A*

Coming-of-Gender Story with Jacob Tobia, n.d.). More notably though, Charis hosts a bi-monthly discussion group titled "Trans and Friends" which is described as a "youth-focused group for trans*people, people questioning their own gender, and aspiring allies" which offers "a facilitated space to discuss gender, relevant resources, and activism around social issues"(*Trans and Friends*, n.d.). As an event that takes place twice monthly it's the most frequently occurring event series on Charis' calendar, a distinction which speaks to its importance to the store's ongoing roster of programming.

Trans-inclusion has come to be the norm in most contemporary feminist spaces, especially when they are known as a hub for the gay and lesbian community and broader queer community (Oder, 2018; Tirado, 2018). However, the inclusion of trans people, and in particular transwomen, in feminist spaces perceived as or maintained as women's spaces has at times been controversial and in fact continues to be a contested issue in some contemporary feminist circles. While focused on subjects from the UK, Sally Hines' research into the experience of both trans men and women about their participation in feminist spaces throughout their lives suggests that for both groups, feminist spaces of the 1980s and 1990s were particularly hostile to their identities (Hines, 2005).

At the same time, prominent examples of the inclusion of transwomen in historic feminist and even lesbian separatist spaces exist, such as the membership of renowned queer and feminist theorist and multidisciplinary artist Sandy Stone in the 1970s California women's music collective Olivia Records (C. Williams, 2014b) which suggest that trans exclusion was not a uniform practice in past feminist communities. However, persistent trans exclusion in other prominent movement spaces has been well documented such as within the famed Michigan Womyn's music festival, which remained controversial into

the 2010s for its historic exclusion of transwomen (C. Williams, 2013). Ongoing tensions over trans exclusion have also been documented in the history of the Florida based feminist collective the Women's Energy Bank or WEB by Jenifer Earle who theorized based on archives of the groups long-running newsletter *Womyn's Words* from 1980s into the 2000s that such controversies were what lead to the eventual dissolution of the group's decades-long in-person manifestation known as the "Salon," demonstrating the divisiveness of the debate within the group (Earles, 2019). Even positive examples such as Sandy Stone's role in Olivia Records were not without controversy, and as Stone speaks of in a 2014 interview, pressure in the form of hate mail which culminated in a death threat, from what have since come to be known as "trans exclusionary radical feminists" or TERFs, lead to her eventual withdrawal from the music collective (C. Williams, 2014a, 2014b).

Like feminist movement spaces, feminist theory has also debated the place of trans people, and in particular transwomen within feminism, with no opposition more prominent than the publication of Janice Raymond's 1979 book *The Transexual Empire*, republished in 1994. Though widely discredited as pseudoscience in intervening decades, many of the books arguments, which center on a biological basis of sex difference and the concept of transgender identity as the construction of a patriarchal medical industrial complex, not only directly impacted the experience of transwomen in feminist communities of the 1970s and 1980s (Rubin, 2012; Serano, 2016; Stone, 1992) but continue to circulate in anti-inclusion rhetoric and have been extremely hard to dispel from feminist communities (Green, 2006; Hines, 2019). This despite the fact that since the 1980s many prominent feminist theorists and have argued against a biological basis for understanding gender and sexuality and queer and trans theorists and activists directly challenged the exclusion of

trans women from feminism (Hines, 2019). Prominent feminist poststructuralist theorists too offered their own rebuttal of the exclusion of trans and gender-nonconforming persons from feminism by questioning the conflation of gender and sexuality. Judith Butler for example, asserted famously, and as far back as 1990, that "When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one."(Butler, 2006). None the less, almost 30 years after Butler's breakout title *Gender Trouble*, popular feminist discourse still struggles with the inclusion of transwomen, as evidenced by prominent Nigerian feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, author of *We Should All Be Feminists* insisting in a 2017 television interview that

> [I]f you've lived in the world as a man, with the privileges that the world accords to men and then sort of changed, switch gender, it's difficult for me to accept that then we can equate your experience with the experience of a woman who has lived from the beginning in the world as a woman, and who has not been accorded those privileges that men are. ("Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on Feminism," 2017)

Adichie drew widespread criticism as her remarks echo the same arguments for trans-exclusion based on essentialist notions about binary gender that feminist and queer theorists as well as trans activists have been working to dismantle for decades. As author Mia Fischer points out "The voices of trans women need to be front and center not because they are 'just like' cis women, but because of their own unique experiences *as* women." That Adichie continued to defend her statements on Facebook even after a public backlash

speaks to the way this issue continues to reverberate throughout popular feminist discourse (Fischer 2017).

Given the continued controversy over trans inclusion within feminism and Charis' legacy as a feminist institution, it is worth noting that Charis does not practices trans inclusion in word alone but is actively engaged in trans advocacy through community building with Trans and Friends and to representing trans experience as integral to feminist interests through its public programming. Within the collaboration on Dear Games the inclusion of trans experience as part of women's experience broadly was represented by the first game we chose to feature on the cabinet, *Mainichi*, by artist Mattie Brice, which depicts a day in the life of a young Black trans woman as she prepares for and attends a coffee date with a friend. The game considers the way that choices she makes about self-presentation impact her reception in public space and portrays street harassment as a part of the character's everyday experience as a woman and a trans person.

The game was a natural fit for the arcade cabinet for a number of reasons, among them, that the length of gameplay is relatively short and that the game has simple, user-friendly controls. These factors both made it ideal for a diverse audience of passersby with varying levels of experience with games and who would be playing the game standing for the duration of gameplay. We were also familiar with Mattie Brice's speaking from past appearances and knew that in addition to having created an enduring work she was also an engaging and powerful speaker. Ultimately, the decision to launch the cabinet with *Mainichi* was a fitting choice given Charis' sustained commitment to trans inclusion. As a collaboration focused on bringing together feminist concerns and video games it was a meaningful statement to showcase a representation of the experience of a Black

transwoman as our first illustration of what a game for feminist players could look like in a space where, crucially, trans people are integral to the community.

3.4.4 Accessibility

Charis website features a statement on "Accessibility" which details the ways in which the organization strives to make the space of the store welcoming to the disability community. While the statement addresses fairly standard physical accommodations like ramps and a van accessible parking lot, it also includes a level of detail which indicates the organization's commitment to accessibility as more than an obligation but a practiced value. Bathrooms are not only wheelchair accessible with accessible changing tables and motion activated fixtures, but they are also gender neutral to make them safe and welcoming for trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming persons. The space is lit exclusively with LED lighting and wayfinding signs are posted in braille for people who are blind or low vision. Events in the space are also designed with accessibility in mind and the statement specifies that events are mic'd for sound, that videos shown in the space are captioned and that free ASL interpretation is available for events with advance notice. The statement outlines the organizations intention to make the space as scent and chemical free as possible through efforts like using "low VOC materials whenever possible" to make the space accessible to people with chemical sensitivities. Finally, it closes by inviting readers to email with questions about the space or "how an event can be made more accessible to you". (*Accessibility | Charis Books & More and Charis Circle*, n.d.)

As we collaborated on the creation of Dear Games programming at the store Charis' value of making the space accessible and welcoming to everyone also informed the design

and purpose of the events we held and the games we selected for the Dear Games arcade cabinet. Anderson encouraged us to consider the accessibility (or lack thereof) of games to audiences with different technical skills and experience levels and not to assume that visitors to the store would necessarily be familiar with any given technology we would be discussing or using.

When designing workshops on game creation these accessibility considerations were a substantial concern. Anderson encouraged us to consider the diverse literacies that attendees might bring to such an event and this significantly influenced the tools we chose to teach and how we introduced them to the community. Twine, the interactive storytelling tool we taught in our first workshop, was not only our choice because it is financially accessible to all but also because it requires no coding or familiarity with technical expertise in game development to use. Twine was also a perfect tool for an event at the bookstore because as a text-based tool it welcomes those with an interest in literature and writing to create games, an interest that Anderson knew to be important to the bookstore community for obvious reasons. To tap into this interest within the community we chose to teach the workshop using the language of storytelling as much as game-making. (*Twine / An Open-Source Tool for Telling Interactive, Nonlinear Stories*, n.d.)

Some events were planned with the express purpose of bridge-building between the Dear Games programming and less technologically skilled community members or those who might be interested in games but not have first-hand experience with them. In these cases, discussions with Anderson directed us towards the creation of specific kinds of events which they felt would be accessible to the community. This included our first event "Dear Games: A Feminist Video Game Primer" which was intended to introduce diverse

community members to the concept that videogames could express feminist ideas or "be feminist" since we knew that members of the audience at Charis events were likely to identify as feminists but less likely to identify as "gamers" or have encountered feminist games. This event was, in purpose, an attempt to make the entire event series more accessible to the Charis community by making the connection between games, feminism and the Dear Games project, legible to community members regardless of their previous experience with technology.

Another event that was similarly focused on the idea of appealing to community members with diverse experience with technology was specifically requested by (and named by Anderson) and was called "Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Video Games (But Were Afraid to Ask)". Presented as a discussion group with seating organized into a circle of chairs in the back room of the bookstore, the event took the form of a wide-ranging conversation, including Anderson, about what attendees liked to play and where they found their games. At this event, which was populated by a smaller group of mostly younger community members, we found that most attendees were engaged with playing games. While there were few questions of the "Afraid to Ask" variety, everyone was enthusiastic about sharing their interest in games with others and happy to contribute ideas about what to play and what sites were good sources of new games for various platforms. Ultimately the group created a public gaming resource using google docs which listed our favorite game recommendations and a short guide to websites for finding new games. The doc was then shared to the event facebook page for other community members to use, in the hopes of making gaming more accessible to the broader Charis community.

3.4.5 Intersectional Feminism

Charis is a devoted feminist organization, founded by women and which has been stewarded almost exclusively by women throughout its more than four decades history and thus affirming and uplifting the voices and leadership of women is a crucial part of their mission. Established during in the heyday of second wave feminism, co-founder Lindra Bryant writes that leading up to the founding of Charis she was immersed in seeking out books by women, courses on women's literature and courses related to women (Bryant, 2009, para. 7) and its clear that she and her collaborator Barbara Borgman envisioned a store that would specialize in "books by and about women" (Chesnut et al., 2009, para. 9). At the same time, historical accounts of Charis' founding and Bryant's own telling make clear that the mission of the bookstore was always broader than a focus exclusively on gender as an organizing principle.

> When we learned that similar bookstores existed and identified as feminist bookstores, we knew that we were a feminist bookstore. Over the years, we have continued to expand what that means. It does not mean that we are a women's bookstore – we have always known that the wholeness we dream of includes men and women and in recent years have understood that such gender designations are way too limiting… We used to say we wanted to "create a world in which all oppressions cease to exist," and that is still our vision – we just want to put it into more concrete terms. (2009, para. 8)

This commitment to simultaneously resisting "all oppressions" whether along axis of power and discrimination such as race, class, sexuality, gender identity and expression or disability, exemplifies Charis' adherence to an intersectional feminist framework. Intersectionality, a theory of the interconnectedness of social categorization created by

legal scholar and critical race theorist Kimberle Crenshaw, stresses the compounding nature of discrimination against those who occupy multiple minoritized social categories. Crenshaw examines Black women's encounters with the legal system to uncover the way in which treating those subject to racism and sexism as discrete erases the experience of those who are marginalized across multiple axes of power. (Crenshaw, 1998) While the division of Charis' values in this chapter into distinct categories of concern from one another might suggest otherwise, the organizations simultaneous sensitivity to class and economic issues, to anti-racism, to queer and trans rights and to disability justice among other social justice concerns embodies a contemporary politics of intersectional feminism which does not privilege gender over other facets of social categorization. As Charis Circle director, ER Anderson wrote in 2009:

> "Feminism" as a word and as a concept has shifted dramatically in the thirty-five years since Charis began: moving from an understanding of feminism as men's oppression of women as articulated by a mostly white, middle class, female group of activists and scholars to an understanding that there are, in fact, many feminisms articulated by people of all genders, races, and bodies. Charis Books, as a feminist institution has come to understand that any monolithic, singular definition of "feminism" is inherently exclusionary (Chesnut et al., para. 27).

In expressing that Charis' feminism does not constitute a singular unified theory but represents a discourse informed and shaped by a multitude of diverse voices and perspectives, Anderson affirms the inclusive nature of the Charis community as one that is intrinsically intersectional. Charis is for feminists, Charis is for everyone.

3.5 Conclusion

These are the values I observed in the Charis' community were realized through the bookstore's day to day practices and from our experiences in creating programming with them. In section three I will discuss the way that feminist communities, including Charis, use practices that have been theorized by contemporary scholars as practices of "feminist accountability" as a way to realize their feminist values, particularly in moments of conflict. The chapter will then explore a selection of three games that act as facilitators of these feminist accountability practices, creating opportunities for players to translate feminist theory into action through the act of engaging with the games themselves.

CHAPTER 4. GAMES AS FEMINIST MOVEMENT BUILDING TOOLS

4.1 Introduction

In Flanagan and Nisseumbaum's *Values at Play in Digital* Games the pair explain that their research is based on three premises "that societies have common (not necessarily universal) values; that technologies, including digital games, embody ethical and political values; and that those who design digital games have the power to shape players' engagement with these values"(Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014). In my analyses of three digital games in this chapter, I argue that these games in fact go one step further, which is say that not only do they embody specific, feminist value, an engagement with which their designers have purposefully shaped, but that the specific activities the games allow players to engage in, map to existing feminist practices (called "accountability practices), which allow players to actually enact certain values. Whether the player is engaging in an imaginative exercise like role playing as a close-minded bar-bouncer, learning life-saving medical information or inwardly interrogating their relationship to identity-based privilege I believe these games, rather than *embodying* values allow players to *act out* these values.

In the last chapter I defined a set of feminist values based on analyzing the practices of Charis community, I'll now talk about one framework for understanding those kinds of practices within feminist communities which some contemporary feminist theorists call "feminist accountability practices". If values are understood as "purposes, ends, or goals of human action" (Flanagan et al., 2008) then accountability practices are

the “human actions” or in the case of Charis, community processes used to actively bring about those “purposes, ends, or goals” informed by feminist literature and theory. In other words, feminist praxis or what Freire describes as "reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed" (Freire & Macedo, 2000, p. 126). I now want to turn to look at the technology of games themselves and think about how, like feminist communities who engage with feminist literature and translate the ideals they read about into action through feminist accountability practices, games themselves can create the possibility of translating feminist theory into action by facilitating processes of “feminist accountability practices” that have the potential to yield feminist values through gameplay.

As Murray outlines in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, digital environments have certain innate qualities that make them distinctly powerful tools for literary creation. I would argue that these qualities also not only also make them well suited conveyances for feminist concepts, but that the qualities that make them interactive according to Murray, i.e. being procedural and participatory, allow them to act as bounded but powerful proxies for practices used by feminist communities to translate theory into personal reflection and action (Murray, 1998).

4.2 Realizing Values through Feminist Accountability

To analyze the games, it is important to understand the concept of feminist accountability practices. As Anne Russo puts it in her book *Feminist Accountability,* these practices “cultivate our willingness to take accountability for the ways in which we participate in and/or are implicated within systems of oppression and privilege” (Russo, 2018). As Kristan Hogan writes in her history of the feminist bookstore movement,

feminist accountability was always at the heart of the movement building work of feminist bookstores which created spaces in which to realize feminist values in practice through the complex work of accountability praxis. Hogan states that the women of this movement

> "…worked together to build feminist literacy to make sense of feminist literature and of each other in conversation. Throughout all of this work, feminist bookstores have not been simply spaces to gather but sites of complex conversations among staff and collectives and, in turn, with readers, about feminist accountability." (xix)

Mentioning the movement of ideas Hogan cites numerous examples of this work of accountability being done by bookstore collectives, whereby they use their organizational power to call into questions instances of discrimination and oppression both within and beyond their spaces. In general, she calls feminist accountability "…the defining framework created by feminist bookwomen, where accountability ensures a feminist dialogue to define, grapple with and evolve a shared set of ethics and ideas about how to live by those ethics" (Hogan, 2016). In Hogan's telling of this history she highlights many instances in which feminist engage in practices of feminist accountability using a combination of dialogue and action to realize their feminist values. Hogan tells the story, for example, from 1977, of the way that the Portland based collective behind the feminist bookstore A Woman's Place, realized the feminist value of anti-racism through a long process of feminist accountability in which they organized to raise awareness of racism within the Portland women's community and later to examine internal racism within their own collective. This had impacts not only on the broader community but also within the collective, leading to a shift towards multi-racial, anti-racist organizing.

Having recently drafted a mission statement or "Basis of Unity" document the group had articulated a set of collective feminist values which they defined as being committed to organize "within the collective on struggles around race, class, age, sexuality, ethnic background, nationality, life-style, politics and heterosexism.". White women within the group decided to enact these values by working with a local Black women's organization, the Portland Black Women's Rap Group, to support them as white anti-racist allies in their campaign against racism being experienced by Black patrons at the cities only women's bar, Rising Moon. After first talking within the collective to convince other white members of the group of the need to oppose racism within the local women's community, the collective members then closed sales at A Woman's Place for a week and used the space to have difficult conversations with white community members about the issue of race and racism and the local bar, leading to a groundswell of complaints to management at the bar from white patrons. By using their own privileged position as white women to challenge racism the collective members of A Woman's Place moved beyond a simple declaration of anti-racist ally-ship within their Basis of Unity document, and instead made themselves accountable for enacting change both within the group and within the women's community of Portland (Hogan, 2016, p. 58).

This move from passive allyship to active accountability is also discussed as part of the framework for feminist accountability described by Russo which she explains as also including a linguistic shift away from the term "ally." Russo suggests that in keeping with the practices of various community organizers and activists who utilize terms like "accomplices," "collaborators," or "co-conspirators" we move towards using language more able to "call folks into action and solidarity" (Russo, 2018, p. 28). In keeping with

this ideological shift away from allyship the collective members of A Woman's Place rather than simply naming themselves as anti-racists chose to enlist themselves as what Russo might call "co-strugglers" against a situation in which woman of color were being mistreated (Russo, 2018, p. 27).

The example of organizers at A Woman's Place also brings to mind another facet of Russo's feminist accountability, the idea that as we are all embedded within structures of power, working from a place of assigning guilt or innocence in relation to oppression simply doesn't help. Russo cites this "carceral logic" of labeling some as perpetuators of oppression and others as innocents as one that makes oppression the fault of the individual rather than recognizing the broader context in which we all act (Russo, 2018, p. 19). A more productive approach is thereby to recognize the way that we are all inextricably implicated by structures of power and focus on how we can disrupt these systems from within. The members of A Woman's Place did this by not denying their own white privilege but expressly using it as a means to campaign against the racism of a bar where they felt "they probably wouldn't have listened to the demands of Black Women" (Hogan, 2016, p.59). Activists at A Woman's Place refused to operate from a position of innocence but instead leveraged their position of comparative power within a racist society to enact change.

Perhaps more crucially, to enacting feminist accountability, the white members of A Woman's place not only advocated for change outside of the collective but their action around Rising Moon sparked more internal discussion of racism within the collective, prompting the group to ask questions such as "Why are there no women of color in the collective? Why do so few women of color come into the store? Why don't we listen when

women of color tell us that they feel uncomfortable here, instead of trying to defend ourselves?" (Hogan, 2016, p.59). Within a year the bookstore had held a mini-conference on race and made strategic changes to address the issue of race within the store, such as appointing a woman of color as co-manager and beginning a practice of meeting monthly to discuss "…Racism in the bookstore and our responsibility to the community in combating racism wherever we find it—and we do find it in *every* community of women as well as society in general" (Hogan, 2016, p.59). As Russo emphasizes, within an accountability approach "Rather than trying to control whether oppression will manifest, the focus is more on how we will respond *when* it manifests" (Russo, 2018, p.29) avoiding what Fellows and Razack call "the race to innocence" in which women can be "making a truth claim that they are subordinate in one system and failing to see their domination in another" (Fellows & Razack, 1998).

Charis is also a community that practices accountability as a means of confronting privilege and working to disrupt oppression and organizers at Charis work strategically to challenge this "race to innocence" and enact practices of accountability in a variety of ways. One way that Charis community members do this is by intentionally holding space for discussions of white privilege and anti-racism through bookstore programming like the meetings of their Race-Conscious Parenting Collective. Another way programming is used to challenge systems of oppression is through the creation of events that deliberately center the voices of authors of color like their ongoing Black Feminist Book Club.

A commitment to confronting privilege does not mean that mistakes aren't made within the bookstore community, however. An example such a mistake occurred in June of 2017. As the store began planning the move to its new location on the campus of Agnes

Scott College an event titled “Open House Preview of the New Charis Location!” was advertised. This was a Saturday afternoon opportunity for Charis community members to see the former residency into which the store would be moving. Organizers hoped to soon raise funding with which to renovate the building into an accessible retail space. Because of the condition of the space the event description specified that the event would not be accessible for wheelchairs or strollers, owing to the lack of an entrance ramp, and this outraged disabled members of the bookstore community and allies who took to the event’s Facebook page discussion section to voice their frustration.

While executive director ER Anderson took pains in lengthy comment to explain that “…it isn't our value to have events at non-accessible venues..” but that the space’s lack of accessibility was precisely the reason for the open-house, which organizers hoped would motivate the future fundraising needed to renovate the space so that it would be “beautifully accessible and functional for people of all abilities”, it was clear that the harm had already been done. “This is not justice,” commented one Facebook user who took Anderson to task for their use of the phrase “all abilities” which they explained “erased the political nature of disability.” “I’m absolutely frustrated and tired of being an afterthought in so many communities!” they continued. Another user wondered why Charis had not planned the event somewhere accessible nearby such as in the parking lot of the new space or at the Decatur Public Library where they could show slides or a virtual tour of the new space and commented “I guess y’all thought us disabled folks aren't worth the effort”. “I'm not going in solidarity with my disabled friends who were an afterthought for this inaccessible event,” a commenter proclaimed. Another Facebook user commented to make Charis staff aware that portable ramps could be rented or bought for just this kind of situation and offered to

help by connecting them with resources for renting or purchasing ramps, "But no matter what," she continued, referencing Anderson's defense that the home was not yet able to accommodate wheeled devices, "the disability community was an afterthought in this instance... The issue here is, that even in many social justice spaces that scream inclusivity, there is so little effort in being inclusive of the disability community. There are low cost ways to make sure the community is included and I hope you all make some effort to seek those out. It is not acceptable that this event was not accessible no matter the state of the home."

In the midst of the righteous anger being expressed it was hard to envision a way forward in this conflict, as Charis' representative had doubled down on their view that the event was by necessity inaccessible and disabled community members and allies had voiced outrage at the unequal treatment of users of wheeled mobility devices. However as a community with a strong commitment to feminist accountability the conversation was far from over. As Russo explains in *Feminist Accountability* "Mistakes are integral to the process" and while the temptation in such a situation might be simply to take Charis to task for its exclusionary event, a close reading of the comments reveals that something much more complex was in motion. Russo calls this "calling-in" in contrast to the act of simply calling someone out for an offense, or "resorting to shame, blame, and rejection" this was instead the act of inviting a perpetrator of harm "…to take responsibility, to understand the impact of their actions, to make it right and to commit to change." (Russo, 2018, p.32)

While members of the disability community were expressing hurt and frustration, they were also expressing care by sharing concrete solutions with Charis leadership for how the organization could make amends, whether by holding the preview outside or at

another location with pictures, or by renting portable ramps to make the un-renovated building accessible the day of the event. Anderson heard this call and responded:

> Thank you to everyone who has offered thoughtful feedback about this event. I am grateful that you believe enough in Charis to voice your anger and disappointment when we make wrong choices. In our haste to get this campaign off the ground we made a hurtful choice that goes against our values. We agree with you that unequal access is not justice and that if everyone can't come into the building it's not ready for the public. If we cannot arrange for ramps, we will hold the event on the front lawn of the new space and share photos and drawings with our entire community without hosting public interior tours. I personally am sorry that in this case the disability community was an afterthought. I hope that you'll choose to attend this event and that Charis and I personally am taking your concerns and criticisms seriously. Thank you, E.R. Anderson, Charis Circle Executive Director (*Open House Preview of the New Charis Location!*, 2017)

Ultimately, ramps were arranged for the day and the updated event description attests with an amendment that reads, "Please note the accessibility of this event has changed. There will now be wheelchair ramps to allow access to the building. Thank you to all who offered feedback. We apologize for the hurt that we caused by not arranging to have temporary ramps from the very beginning." Wheeled device users were able to attend and pictures of the event show one attendee, posing with a sign that reads "Thanks advocates for pressing for access. Thanks Charis for responding with action. Thanks Charis for 43 years of 'live and learn' and helping thousands of others to do the same." (*Open House Preview of the New Charis Location!*, 2017)

The example of Charis' mistake and reparation make clear that even when something goes wrong it is still possible for it to be set right through a process of feminist accountability. Calls from the community lead to a course correction that demonstrated that, as activist and blogger Mia Mckenzie notes, being an ally is "…not an identity" or identity marker like a value that can simply be claimed, but instead "It's a practice. It's an active thing that must be done over and over again, in the largest and smallest ways, every day" (Mckenzie, 2013). And Charis' response was necessarily an active one, which beyond simply correcting the mistake by accommodating wheeled device users, also invited dialogue and showed a willingness to learn. In response to the criticism by one commenter of having used the language "people of all abilities" Anderson writes "…thank you for educating me about the preferred language around abilities. I hear how that erases the political nature of disability and sounds like "all lives matter." I will change the way I talk about it going forward." (Anderson, 2017)

Later, when clarifying that the event was to be made accessible Anderson continued to invite conversation and expressed a commitment to learn from the community members who had shared their knowledge, "We welcome calls to learn and grow alongside those of you who are deepest in this work and will be reaching out to those who have offered to have further community dialogs so that we will live up to our genuine and long-held desire to be a positive intersectional space for people in the disability community" (Anderson, 2017). It is this kind of engagement with mistakes that produces real change and as Russo explains, "…if we collectively engage conflicts, divisions, and the systems that fuel them, instead of avoid and deny them, we can create the change we envision as part of our community and movement building" (Russo, 2018, p.31).

4.3 Realizing Feminist Accountability Through Play

But how can game experiences be a part of these kinds of feminist accountability processes in ways that support feminist movement building? The remainder of this chapter explores three examples of games that each in their own way use interactivity to engages players in one or more aspects of the feminist accountability processes described by Hogan and Russo in the realization of feminist values. Through these games I hope to show the way that digital game experiences can act as proxies for traditional community-based accountability processes, leading players to critically reflect and shift from passivity to action in ways that produce feminist accountability through play facilitating feminist movement building.

Previous scholarship has already established the use of games for activist means and the three games I examine in this chapter are excellent examples of what Flanagan characterizes as "activist games". According to Flanagan, in *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*, "activist games" are "characterized by their emphasis on social issues, education, and, occasionally, intervention" and that they "benefit an intended outcome beyond a game's entertainment or experiential value alone"(Flanagan, 2013).

To some digital games might still seem to be a novel use of technology towards feminist organizing goals, I would argue that their use is no different from the ways that activists and organizers routinely use the affordances of digital networked technology to achieve the same goals they've set out to historically through other means. As my narrative about Charis' open-house event demonstrates, feminists are already using the affordances of social media for organizing in person events by disseminating information amongst the

community and for facilitating discussion that are crucial to feminist community building. While the use of social media doesn't "automate" the process of outreach, the use the procedural and participatory qualities of digital tools to extend and augment the capabilities of organizers is not unprecedented.

One example which foreshadows the use of digital games as a means to outsource the emotionally demanding interpersonal work of movement building is the Twitter bot titled @StayWokeBot, a collaboration between Black Lives Matter activists DeRay Mckesson, Sam Sinyangwe and the tech cooperative Feel Train run by creative technologists Courtney Stanton and Darius Kazemi. @StayWokeBot was designed both to boost morale among activists by tirelessly offering affirmation to its online followers, as well as to disseminate action-oriented directives specific to given followers location, such as "contact information for that state's senators and a prompt to ask them to vote in favor of two gun-control measures" (Dewey, 2016). As Kazemi describes in blog post on the project, this tool was originally inspired by a similar bot designed to support Stanton's online feminist activism, titled "@101atron". To alleviate the burden of emotional labor Stanton experienced as a feminist activist being constantly queried with basic questions about feminism from strangers. @101atron could "… be CC'ed on Twitter conversations with natural commands like "@101atron please tell @tinysubversions about cultural appropriation". The bot would then supply links to a given topic alleviating Stanton from having to engage in the draining work of constantly educating newcomers interested in learning more about feminism (Kazemi, 2015).

Like @StayWokeBot and @101atron, these games not only educate about topics important to feminist communities like inclusion, community-based healthcare and

identity-based privilege, but their interactive nature offers players a structured experience through which to engage with these ideas in an action-oriented way, gaining skills and self knowledge to enact feminist values that would ordinarily be transmitted through interpersonal processes like feminist accountability practices. Some use the procedural nature of games as systems to simulate real world concepts and experiences in persuasive depictions or what Bogost calls "procedural rhetoric" (Bogost, 2010) at the same time though it is the reflective engagement with ones own accountability that these games prompt which makes the vehicles for realizing feminist values. Whether coaching players to reflect on their own privilege, allowing them to role-play as a means to grapple with their own responsibility for the harm of exclusion or leading them through scenarios that teach potentially life-saving harm-reduction skills these games use their participatory and procedural nature as a means to produce experiences that not only raise awareness but have real world implications for enacting feminist values.

4.3.1 Breeder Bouncer

Breeder Bouncer begins like many Twine games. Simple white text highlighted with blue links over a flat black screen. On the left, the title and names of the authors, Courtney Stanton and Darius Kazemi (the same duo behind the @StayWokeBot). To the right, the start screen text reads:

The only time I

went to my hometown's one gay bar, I went with my girlfriend, my best

friend, and her trans boyfriend. We got sneered at and called "breeders"

by the guy working the door.

This game is for that

guy. (Kazemi & Stanton, n.d.)

Below the text, blue hyperlinks invite the player to select from three possible days of the week (Saturday, Thursday or Monday) to begin a simulation of a night in the life of said bouncer whose goal is specifically to "bounce breeders," i.e. admit only queer attendees into the nightclub over which he presides. I click on the first link "Friday" so I can get to work. "Saturdays are the busiest night of the week." the text reads, "Lots of people will be trying to get in, so it should be easy to find people to judge." My objective is clear, I'll be making the tough calls determining the relative queerness of various would be gay bar patrons to decide if they are worthy or deserve 'bouncing'. I'm ready, I click the text below. It prompts "Bounce some breeders."

What follows is a series of detailed descriptions of the guests who arrive at my post. Character studies in the form of procedurally generated strings of various subcultural signifiers. His labret piecing and pompadour, her crop top and fedora and everyone of them, a regrettable tattoo of something awful like an old-timey anchor, a cherry blossoms, pixelated heart etc. I'm striking out left and right with my guesses, letting in tons of "breeders"! Unjustly bouncing a lesbian in a lace leotard! I start to notice though that some details sound a bit more mundane. Shoulder length curls, Birkenstocks? Maybe I'm onto the pattern- inferring from these normative gay club culture clichés who the deserving customer are and who I'm supposed to bounce.

When I admit the right customers, I'm congratulated for making the club more "fabulous!" and learn what invisible aspect of this patron's identity- "(turns out she's a lesbian!)" or "(turns out they're intersex!)" -actually qualified them for admission, independent of their questionable accessory choices. On my next turn, I offer a fateful "come on in, hon" to the wrong pair of sequin hot pants, and am shamed- "Oh no, you let a breeder into the club! Fucking breeders!" The game is over, I've failed at my duties as "Breeder Bouncer." Below my losing score, a sardonic, tip reveals the game's parting message "Wow, you can barely guess if someone's hetero or not just based on their physical appearance. Maybe you should stop doing that entirely." The game is over.

Breeder Bouncer takes the long route around to its point that our assumptions about the identities of others are frequently wrong and harmful but in doing so it makes a powerful statement about the intergroup violence that too often comes as a result of gatekeeping within marginalized communities. Players are not given the option of "innocence" to recall Fellows and Razack's "race to innocence" or rather to see themselves as politically neutral in situation in which harm is being done. To play they must necessarily engage with the participatory nature of the digital game experience, propelling the narrative forward by judging the procedurally generated characters and choosing hyperlinks that will assign an identity of straight or queer to them. In performing the actions, it takes to complete the game they must embody the cis-gendered, normatively gay "guy" at the door of the gay club. Players are asked to engage with darker side of what it means to belong to a given community in which even those who experience oppression as can still do harm to others by making assumptions about identity. In this case their sexuality, gender identity,

gender expression and experience. As Russo explains in section titled "Refusing Innocence, Embracing Accountability,"

> "One of the formidable barriers to owning up to how we are implicated in systems of oppression is the binary framework of guilt/innocence that pervades the dominant culture in the United States…We defend ourselves as victim of some other oppression and/or we defend our individual intentions as innocent. We often present ourselves as one of the "good" ones located on the side of those marginalized, oppressed, and silenced, and we do this, in part, by primarily focusing on how we experience oppression." (2018)

Breeder Bouncer forecloses the possibility of innocence for even queer players. One can't declare themselves blameless as the game asks you to do the dirty work of sorting out who gets to "belong" in the queer-identified space of the small-town Gay Bar and whose identity is not legible enough to grant them admission. In doing so players must confront the ways in which they themselves are also guilty of using surface signifiers to discern the identity of others, the only way to play the game is to embrace the regulating of others identities, until finally the game reminds us of the oppressiveness of our own logic, inviting us to reflect on the need to dismantle our own internal instincts to police and gatekeep others. As Russo suggests "a practice of taking accountability for our acts and/or complicity can free us up to act, to change, and to transform ourselves." By forcing players to become "that guy" they are freed to acknowledge the ways in which we will all sometimes be that guy and that we must work consciously to hold ourselves to accountability.

4.3.2 Administer Naloxone

This game created with an interactive fiction authoring tool called Texture functions slightly differently than Twine, in that new passages are revealed not by clicking links but by dragging and dropping text boxes to highlighted text links allowing for multiple passages to emerge from the same link depending on the text box selected. *Administer Naloxone* is a narrative game that uses the Texture tool to tell the story of an opioid overdose both from the perspective of the drug user experiencing an overdose and then subsequently from the perspective of one reviving an opioid overdose victim using the injectable overdose-reversing drug Naloxone. During the game's first part, in which the "you" of the game refers to the person experiencing overdose, the conversation circles around themes related to the experience of users. This includes memories of watching family members use and reflections on being perceived as an addict based on race or class. This leads players to consider the way identity and privilege shape our attitudes and assumptions about people who use drugs.

Although harm reduction work with opioid drug users was not an area of focus within the feminist women's health movement of the 1960s and 1970s which primarily focused on issues related to reproductive healthcare (Norsigian, 2019) contemporary reproductive justice advocates have made connections between the opioid crisis and concerns for women's health (Newman, n.d., 2017). Scholars of public health also link harm reduction strategies aimed at protecting communities of injection drug users like syringe exchange programs to a long lineage of community based healthcare initiatives involving activist strategies such as the feminist women's health movement and later the HIV/AIDS activism of groups like ACT UP who prominently engaged in direct action based on the needs of the local community (Tempalski, 2007). Given the

interconnectedness between queer and feminist activism from the late 20th century to today I believe harm reduction, particularly in the context of the current opioid epidemic, should be understood as an issue of concern to feminist activists alongside other public health issues that affect marginalized populations.

While the *Administer Naloxone* unfolds in the form of a choice based second-person narrative it also imparts practical medical information on how to spot someone experiencing an overdose, how to move the victim into recovery position, administer rescue breathing and inject Naloxone. Because of the real-world utility of the information the game conveys it not only functions as a narrative experience with a rhetorical message of compassion for opioid drug users but also acts as practical teaching tool of harm reduction techniques. From the perspective of feminist accountability practices I would argue that this game exemplifies the concept of moving from the position of "passive allyship" or bystander relationship to harm reduction strategies towards becoming an advocate equipped to actually implement lifesaving help in the event of an overdose within one's own community.

4.3.3 So You've Been Called Out

So You've Been Called Out: A Handy Guide to Receiving Social Justice Related Criticism on the Internet by is another branching choice based narrative twine game, albeit one that forgoes the black screen and blue and white text of an unformatted game in favor of a purple screen, lavender text and green links in a bubbly large point font. Beginning with the prompt "which of these situations feels closest to what you're experiencing right now?" the game presents four possible call out scenarios. These include a one-on-one

confrontation, the discovery of an indirect call out while snooping online, the experience of being unfriended/unfollowed online because of something one has said or done, and finally someone who has not experienced an online call-out but is afraid it is going to happen to them. The game then walks the player through the feelings they might be having, troubleshooting likely reactions of defensiveness, denial, and insecurity. It then tries to coach the player against actions that will further erode trust or confirm suspicions of bad faith, encouraging accountability instead.

This game was used as part of the opening orientation session of the Queerness and Games conference in 2015, underlining its functionality as not simply as a rhetorical statement on what reaction one should have to a call-out, but rather a functional tool to address and support social relations within real-world communities. *So You've Been Called Out* is in a way a "calling-in" simulator of sorts, to return to the concept Russo refers to in *Feminist Accountability,* but which has also been written about extensively online by various organizers and activists throughout the past decade, often posed as a strategically appropriate alternative to the practice of "calling out" that the game's title refers to (Ahmad, 2015; Ferguson, 2015; Mahan, 2017; Trần, 2013). *So You've Been Called Out*'s author, multimedia artist and independent video game designer Squinky is obviously keenly aware of the discourse of calling-out vs. calling-in and refers to it in the games epilogue which is found via a link that asks "So... why did you write this, anyway?"

> I see people writing about "callout culture" a lot, and while a lot of digital ink seems to be spilled on scrutinising the behaviour of people who do the calling out, very little seems to get said about ways to constructively react when you are the recipient of a callout.

> When we are called out for saying or doing something derogatory, dismissive, or otherwise hurtful towards a marginalised group of people, it can often be a hard pill to swallow, even if it is feedback that we desperately need to hear. I believe that if we can learn to take such criticism of our behaviour not as permanent indictments of character but as learning experiences, our communities will be stronger, healthier, and better at conflict resolution. (Squinkifier, n.d.)

Pointing out that the debate over call-outs seems to be one-sidedly focused on the behavior of those doing the calling out, who may themselves be victims of harm. Squinky doesn't suggest that the game is intended as a rejoinder but rather as a constructive intervention focused on helping recipients of a so called "call-outs" to make amends and learn from their experience without perpetuating further harm. What the game does so well that I would argue simulates feminist accountability practice, is offer players the safe space for failure and learning that is needed for challenging and perhaps unlearning one's own unexamined privilege. Like a conversation with a trusted friend, the game offers players the chance to safely explore their feelings about being called out while also challenging them to do better. In an activist context like a feminist community this would be a taxing conversation to undertake with a newcomer, and is an intimate interaction someone new to a feminist community is unlikely to be offered by those in a position to offer this kind of counsel, but in the form of a pre-scripted but branching game it makes the work of helping someone come to terms with a call-out. In doing so it effectively automates the painful if common experience of an uninitiated community member learning from a call-out without requiring more experienced community members to invest the time and emotional labor

required to dialogue with someone who is just coming to terms with their privilege as inevitably, anyone new to intersectional feminist organizing will.

If a user selects a link to indicate they "…can't see how what [they] said or did could possibly be derogatory, dismissive, or otherwise hurtful towards a marginalised group of people." the game responds with kind and empathetic feedback "I can see why you'd feel that way. We like to think we're on the right track when it comes to treating other people well," before going on to explain why the players unexamined privilege is likely to be the source of the conflict and encouraging them to learn from the feedback they are getting about the experience of those without the same privilege.

Players are given a space while playing the game, to be vulnerable or angry and are met with patience and care. When exploring the scenario of having been blocked on social media by someone because of their oppressive behavior they are told "I'm sorry; that must have hurt." And asked "How are you feeling about this?" to which they can choose respond that they are confused, "I don't believe I actually did anything wrong", indignant "maybe I made a mistake, but isn't their reaction a bit extreme?" or ashamed "I am an awful, awful person and no one is ever going to want to talk to me again!" and the game will respond with patient but thoughtful feedback that validates their feelings "You're just a human being who sometimes makes mistakes." It then encourages them to understand the perspective of others with less privilege, "you grew up in a society that privileges some kinds of people and lived experiences and shunts others to the margins." It performs the kind of affective labor needed to address this delicate situation but that one could realistically only expect from a close ally engaging you deliberately in a dialogue on anti-oppression. Having someone to engage in this dialogue is likely out of reach for people who aren't already

established members of an online or real-world feminist community. However, the game can help them to privately do some of the work of gaining self-awareness that being part of such a community will demand of them in the future.

Critics of both calling out and calling-in have asserted the importance of calling-out as a tactic for demanding accountability, pushing back on the narrative that calling-in is preferable in all instances of oppressive speech or action (Ahmad, 2017; Ziyad, 2017). As writer Hari Ziyad explains

> "Putting all of the blame for toxic activist spaces on calling-out is a silencing tactic that will ultimately harm those who don't have any other avenues to public accountability. The feelings of abusers who are called out is not more important than the harm they have the potential to enact." (2017)

As Ziyad notes, there are risks to prohibiting call-outs to protect the feelings of those doing harm within a community. And yet as activist and writer Ngọc Loan Trần explains, "it's possible to have multiple tools, strategies, and methods existing simultaneously." Trần specifies that calling-in is for "people who we want to be in community with, people who we have reason to trust or with whom we have common ground" and whom we "want to see on the other side of the hurt, pain, and trauma." What *So You've Been Called Out* asserts is that maybe there is a way for even those we don't know or who aren't yet part of in the same communities as us to "…to take responsibility, to understand the impact of their actions, to make it right and to commit to change." (Russo, p.32) through processes facilitated by digital gameplay.

Like Stanton and Kazemi's @101atron bot, *So You've Been Called Out* offloads labor that can be emotionally taxing or at times tedious for organizers to a digital process, but in this case one imbued with patience and care in its fixed dialogue choices. For newcomers to feminist communities who are inexperienced with concepts like privilege and oppression based on identity and experience, this opportunity to safely experience the feminist accountability practices of being "called-in" might be an essential first step in helping them to navigate confrontation and conflict within feminist community.

CHAPTER 5. IMPLICATIONS: TOWARDS A FEMINIST WIG

5.1 Introduction

Previous chapters in this manuscript have offered profiles of two different types of organizations. One a historic feminist bookstore in the American South with a decades-long history of local community building through public programming on literature and social justice issues. The other a collection of three similar organizations, emerging in different North American cities in the early 2010s, which focus on teaching women how to create their own video games. In this chapter I will dig into the linkages and distinctions between these two types of organizations. In particular, I focus on the way each is oriented towards the commercial realities of bookselling and the video games industry versus more progressive goals. I argue that these organizations offer diverging case studies in how organizational projects with practical aims can approach a broader social change agenda through their community engagement work.

Ultimately, I question whether the goal of increasing the number of women in the games industry (which I argue is a primary goal of WIG organizations) is compatible with broader intersectional feminist objectives. Drawing on existing scholarship that has examined such questions, I wonder if the industry is capable of sustaining change through this type of intervention, who is left out of this vision of progress and what compromises are inherent to the participation of women and other minoritized groups in institutions such as the games industry which may be inherently hostile to them. In questioning some of the underlying assumptions about the value of increasing the presence of women in the games industry as a goal unto itself, I wish to suggest that the model offered by Charis, of building

an intersectional feminist community, not aligned with a commercial industry, might ultimately be a more impactful project if building capacity for social change is a fundamental and overarching goal of WIG work.

Harkening back to my discussion of feminist accountability practices within historic feminist bookstore communities like Charis and others and my exploration of how games can facilitate the enactment of these practices by players, I suggest that video games themselves have the potential to serve an important purpose within feminist movement building efforts. However, future feminist games can only be realized in a production context that supports them and to the extent that a commitment to feminist praxis among future game developers can be fostered. I argue that the current games industry is incompatible with feminist movement building goals and thus unlikely to produce games that could support feminist practices because it is too entrenched within systems of oppression. Returning to the discussion of WIG organizations I contend that ultimately without a strong organizational focus on confronting systematic oppression of all kinds, both within and outside of the games industry these organizations fall short of confronting the root causes of inequality in the games industry in a way that could lead to the meaningful change needed to achieve real diversity. Confronting inequality through an intersectional lens is essential to sustaining diversity in the industry and building a critical consciousness amongst future commercial game developers which could lead to more intersectional feminist games being developed within the industry. Encouragingly though, I detail changes since the time of my original study, in the way these organizations have come to define themselves and the goals of their programming. This suggests that over

time they are coming to embrace a more intersectional approach and broader set of goals than simply professionalizing women game developers.

5.2 What is the goal of these projects?

To begin to characterize the fundamental differences and similarities between the two organizational models exemplified by Charis and the three WIG organizations, I want to begin by examining what we can learn from the language they use to describe themselves and their mission to the public. Both exist in relationship to larger commercial enterprises (the publishing world, the games industry) but with more complex agendas than simply selling books or training game developers. Charis Books & More and Charis' Circle's combined mission statement does not in fact explicitly mention its basic function as a local book retailer but instead speaks to the organization's commitment to a wide range of social issues and its progressive goals. This ambiguous relationship to a traditional business model dates back to the store's beginnings as, initially a non-profit, before years later being recategorized as a business before, decades later, establishing a sort of double bottom line organization with a dedicated non-profit financial structure and a separate retail operation, the arrangement that has remained since 1996 (Chesnut et al., 2009). This history of moving between designations before eventually achieving status as both a community serving institution and a business, speaks to ways in which Charis has transcended the framework of a traditional bookseller throughout its history. According to the current statement of mission and vision Charis "fosters sustainable feminist communities, works for social justice, and encourages the expression of diverse and marginalized voices" (*Mission and Vision | Charis Books & More and Charis Circle*, n.d.). I take this at face value to mean that indeed this is the way the organization sees its primary purpose, i.e. as

a project to build community, engage in struggles for justice and uplift the voices of the marginalized, rather than to sell books and generate revenue for its owners. Accounts of Charis history document that decisions about leadership, business structure and the store's identity hinged on consensus building between workers and leadership and upon a shared articulation of a feminist ethics, rather than on profits or business motives and I believe this illustrates the sincerity of their mission (Chesnut et al., 2009).

Self-descriptions from the WIG organizations are, on the other hand, much more literal, leaving these organizations underlying politics and commitment to social change less explicit. Code Federation, according to their website, aims to "offers free development workshops in order to facilitate the creation of video game titles by women" (*The Code Liberation Foundation*, 2015). Voxelles describes itself as a "…a women-in-games initiative which aims to promote diversity in the game-making community" (*About | Pixelles (Montreal)*, 2014). Girl Made Games, is notably the only organization that identifies as feminist and originally its masthead read, "We are a non-profit feminist organization dedicated to supporting women interested in creating games." While these descriptions offer a straightforward account of what these WIG organizations do functionally their focus specifically on working with women or promoting "diversity" in an industry known for its lack of diversity (particularly gender diversity) and in a medium rife with sexist tropes, implies however, that these interventions represent a progressive agenda.

However, even if these WIG organizations have higher level goals in mind, it is clear from comparing their missions and Charis' that the WIG organizations profiled see their purposes as achieved mainly through professional development, versus traditional

feminist community building strategies. I believe there is much that these contemporary WIG organizations, which are devoted on the one hand to positive social impact, and on the other, to delivering practical services, can learn from longstanding organization such as Charis, whose goals are simultaneously more wide-reaching even as they may be less practical. With its history of organizing to combat systemic inequality for decades, Charis stands as an example of how even an organization embedded within a traditional business structure can hold space for broad coalition building between diverse community members. While the store doesn't offer programming designed to bolster job readiness or teach tech skills, the work that Charis does in the form of public programming and hands-on work with community members provides space and facilitation for critical conversations and movement building towards political and social change.

5.3 Is Getting Women into the Industry the Goal for WIGs?

It is important to note that none of the four values that I explored in Chapter II, (accessibility, safety, empowerment, or community) nor the practices that exemplified them, are specific to a mission of professionalizing women towards the games industry. However, there were other indicators in my research on these organizations that lead me to believe that one of their primary goals was getting the women they served into the games industry. While Harvey and Fisher specifically draw a distinction between industry organizations, i.e. "advocacy and networking groups such as WIG International, the WIG Special Interest Group of the International Game Developers Association (IGDA)" (2015, p. 576) and so-called "incubators" oriented towards women who are newcomers to games, stating that "WIG associations are usually focused on the commercial industry whereas incubators are typically focused on independent game production for first-timers" (2015,

p. 577). The labeling of some forms of digital game making as more "Indie" than "commercial" is misleading in an era in which small studios and independent developers compete for the same markets, and often on the same digital distribution platforms (Steam, Apple's App Store, Google Play and increasingly Nintendo.com as more independent games are made available for the Nintendo Switch) as "AAA" game studios which one might associate with the mainstream games industry. The meaningfulness of the distinction between so called "Indie" and "AAA" games has in fact been a subject of much debate in the past decade with many critics and scholars articulating the porousness of both categories when it comes to distinguishing the production context, marketing or aesthetic qualities of digital games (Keogh, 2015; Lipkin, 2012; Parker, 2013) and independent developers themselves are increasingly taking on the duties of the many complex professional roles found in a traditional studio setting (Whitson et al., 2021).

With the understanding that the "games industry" can describe a diverse array of labor and production contexts, perhaps a more meaningful question is if a goal of these WIG organizations is to increase the number of women pursuing game development as a professional career versus an artistic practice or craft (Westecott, 2012). My research indicates the former is true as much as the latter. Voxelles for example, offers a mentorship program specifically to support those aspiring to join the commercial games industry. As their website reads, "Wondering how to improve your chances in an increasingly competitive industry? We have a network of experts from every discipline, ready to give you honest guidance!" And with a clear orientation towards early career support, the program offers participants "feedback on your portfolio, code, and/or CV from a professional in your field" (*Mentorship Program | Pixelles (Montreal)*, n.d.). Girl Made

Games offers different career resources, such as maintaining an online bulletin board of "Jobs and Paid Opportunities" to connect members with (notably) exclusively "paid" roles (this word is bolded in the call for opportunities) suggesting both that the organization wants to avoid exploitative unpaid opportunities, but also that they aim to connect members with legitimate professional opportunities. Girl Made Games also recently launched a foray into supporting entrepreneurship among its members, with its "Studio Startup program" aimed at supporting the creation of new game studios in Canada, further demonstrating their desire to help members develop as career professionals rather than hobbyists (*DMG Toronto: Announcing Damage Labs*, n.d.). Code Federation's "About" page is also clear about its goal of wanting to encourage women to pursue professional careers, albeit in more than just the games industry. It reads, "Our members have stood as role models within the games and creative coding industries to inspire and encourage women into the field through public speaking events." Code Federation also offers services designed to bolster the careers of women who are already professionals such as giving members access to "a support network for professionals working within the field…connecting all of the organization's volunteers online in an internal social network" (*About Us*, n.d.). Voxelles too, has programming aimed at supporting existing professionals such as its "Career Accelerator" program designed for those "working in the game industry for 5 or more years" suggesting that supporting women as games professionals is a part of the organizations agenda (*Pixelles Career Accelerator | Pixelles (Montreal)*, n.d.).

5.4 But Should We Want More Women in Games?

While organizations devoted to helping women make games are attempting to make a positive intervention in an industry where change is long overdue, some researchers point

out the questions this raises about what kind of sacrifices women may be asked to make to pursue careers given the state of the industry, and if ultimately their increased participation is even a desirable outcome bearing in mind the conditions they are likely to face.

For decades now the commercial game development industry has garnered a reputation for being at times both exploitative and exclusionary as journalists (D'Anastasio, 2018, 2019, 2020; Gurley, 2019; Klepek, 2019; Liao, 2020; Lorenz & Browning, 2020; Martens, 2020; Orr, 2019; Schreier, 2020a, 2020b; Takahashi, 2020) and scholars have reported. As academic Mia Consalvo argued in a 2008 book chapter aptly titled "Crunched by Passion," the common labor practice of "crunch" in the mainstream industry (i.e. periods of weeks or sometimes months in which employees work exorbitant overtime to meet production milestones or external deadlines) is a well-established feature of the industry and one of many issues that contribute to a work culture that fails to retain women in significant numbers. While the percentage of women participating in the industry has increased steadily from the 7.1% captured by the 2004 survey upon which Consalvo draws, (*Quality of Life in the Game Industry*, 2004.) to 24% of respondents on the IGDA's 2019 survey, (*Developer Satisfaction Survey (DSS) – IGDA*, n.d.) this 15 year difference has still not balanced out an overwhelmingly male industry.

As Consalvo argues in "Crunched," WIG projects could very well be successful at recruiting and training women for the games industry, but if the conditions of work and life they find in their new careers don't allow them to thrive and ultimately cannot retain them as workers, can we consider these efforts successful? Citing statistics that only 34% of women respondents said they planned to stay in games for the remainder of their careers and that 51.2 % of respondents overall said they planned to leave the industry within 10

years, she explains, "…programs pipelines, and curricula meant to encourage girls and women to enter this industry will have little long-term impacts if women leave the industry in a decade or less, as recent reports have suggested (IGDA, 2004)" (Consalvo, 2008, p. 178).

Comparing the 2004 data that informed Consalvo's study with 2019 data, there are some indications that working conditions have improved in the intervening decade and a half. In her interviews with professional women in the games industry in 2008, "crunch" labor practices and the way they impacted women's home lives and caring responsibilities were a prominent theme and a reason some women gave for leaving individual employers or careers in games altogether (Consalvo, 2008, p. 182). An increase in the percentage of developers who reported having children which in 2019 was 35%, versus the, 76.9% of respondents who said they did not have children in 2004 (and 82.9% of female respondents) suggests that perhaps the labor practices of the industry have become more hospitable to workers with families. But the 2019 numbers are not broken down by gender, and with women continuing to shoulder an outsize percentage of childcare labor, almost twice as many hours per week as men according to 2013 data (Pew Reseach, 2013) it is unclear how much progress this represents for working mothers within the industry.

Data related to the precarity of workers indicates that today's industry is rife with employment instability. Of the 2019 respondents, "over two-thirds (68%) had had one or two employers in the past five years and over one-quarter (28%) had three to five employers in the past five years." The high level of job churn in the industry was also indicated by the limited expectation among employees that they would remain with their current employers for the long term. 26% reported that they expected to stay with their

employer 1-3 years, 23% reported 4-6 years, 19% said they did not know. Equally distressing were middling statistics related to career advancement from the 2019 survey:

> "Although 46% of respondents indicated that their company had either 'good' (30%) or 'excellent' (12%) potential for promotion or career advancement, 21% had a neutral opinion, and an additional 36% said 'fair' or 'poor'. Respondents seemed relatively divided about whether their occupation had a clear career path. Almost half said that their occupation did have a clear career path (42%), but the remainder said that there was no clear career path (42%), or that they were not sure (16%)." (p. 25)

Given the high job turnover and employment insecurity in games, the ambivalence of workers about their prospects for promotion and career growth, it seems a particularly cruel form of optimism, to borrow queer theorist Lauren Berlant's term (Berlant, 2011) to assume that women workers who already face well documented barriers to success in this industry will find stable and fulfilling employment as part of the games industry workforce.

Returning to Consalvo's main point of concern (i.e. the practice of "crunch" in the industry), it is clear that despite the intervening 15 years, exhausting hours remained a grim feature of the working conditions in the industry in 2019, though the authors of the report note the relative improvement over 2017 numbers:

> 41% said that their job involves crunch time (compared to 51% in 2017), and another 35% reported working long or extended hours that they do not refer to as crunch (compared to 44% in 2017). Moreover, 36% said they were in crunch more than twice in the last two years, and 42% said that crunch time was expected at their

> workplace. During crunch, most employees reported working between 50 and 59 hours (38%) or between 60 and 69 hours per week (19%). A sizeable minority (13%) reported working more than 70 hours per week in crunch while 17% worked between 45-49 hours per week. (p. 25)

That 15 years later, the same issue that workers in 2004 cited as their chief concern remains the prevailing modus operandi in the games industry is a troubling fact that should give pause to advocates promoting careers in games. In particular, projects specifically recruiting women workers should consider the effects these practices may have on women, who already find themselves at particular disadvantage due to the impact of sexism on other aspects of their job, such as a reported 26% pay gap in the games and interactive industry, compared to the 19% global pay gap (Jones, 2020a).

In a final statistic that could be understood as damning or indicative of progress, in response to the question 'Do you feel there is equal treatment and opportunity for all in the game industry?,' 65% of 2019 respondents answered 'no', an increase from the 2017 and 2016, where 50% and 58% answered 'no'. (p.14) Although this is another clear indicator of the persistent inequality present in the industry the question as to whether this increased percentile indicates an increasing awareness amongst games workers with regards to structural inequality in the industry, or an actual increase in the severity of inequality is unclear from this data alone.

5.5 *"Add women and stir"*

Beyond asking relevant questions about what the lived experience of women in the industry is currently and what that might predicts about their success in the field over time,

other critics of WIG projects question the prevailing logic behind these efforts. These projects are often predicated on the notion that increasing the amount of direct representation of women in the industry will naturally lead to less sexism and, as its sometimes suggested, this could in turn produce better (read: less sexist) games. For example one annual scholarship program by Sony Online Entertainment called "GIRL:Gamers In Real Life" is described as such:

> G.I.R.L. helps raise awareness of the serious female gaming audience to the media in an effort to encourage the gaming industry to positively promote women throughout all facets of games, game production and into game management; which will hopefully impact the way females are depicted in video games and create and influence content to be appealing to women.[1]

This description of GIRL is highlighted by researcher Adrienne Shaw as a prototypical example of the claims made about WIG projects, and Shaw breaks down the problems with this chain of assumptions linking an increase in women in the games industry to better representation of, and more games for, women. This "add women and stir" approach[2] has long been criticized by feminist scholars for the way it fails to account for external factors that impact women's representation in given sphere and as Shaw explains, in the case of GIRL, it "…assumes that there are no structural limitations within the industry that preclude this representation, that men in the industry are simply incapable of creating texts that are not representations of themselves or their fantasies, and that all

[1] From the GIRL frequently--asked--questions page, https://www.soe .com/girl--qa, as it appears in Shaw, 2015.
[2] A phrase from Shaw, 2015, attributed to Bunch, 1987 by Abbate, 2017)

women are feminists."(2015, p. 5) In short, to essentialize women as inherently a solution to sexist representation is to ignore the reality that people of all genders are as capable of participating in and maintaining systemic sexism as they are of refuting and dismantling it. Having more women in the industry in no way guarantees that games, not to mention working conditions, will improve for other women or people of any gender.

Furthermore as both Harvey and Fisher (2015) and Stephanie Orme (2018) have noted, initiatives aimed at seeding diversity within the games workforce are not necessarily engaged in challenging the structural forces at work within the industry that preclude some from taking part. These authors are critical of the "everyone can make games" ethos espoused by some individuals and projects that claim to be promoting diversity in the industry whether specifically related to gender or to other identity categories. Both point to the distinctly post-feminist and neo-liberal ideologies underlying both claims that the presence of more women in the games industry can reform it and that more generally speaking "everyone" regardless of structural barriers, "can make games". Harvey and Fisher (2015) take up media theorist Rosalind Gill's (2002) analysis of gender in European new media production for the way it grounds post-feminist articulations of women's labor within the neoliberal paradigm. Post-feminist understandings of women's empowerment favor modes of thought "where power is linked to individualism and personal expression" and "the extensive and intensive degree of self-surveillance and self-discipline that is placed on women" (Harvey & Fisher, 2015, 584) within this framework we can understand WIG projects that emphasize women's self-motivated, technical skill-building, individual achievement and career advancement within an infamously hostile industry as emblematic of "the emphasis on human freedom located within the choices offered by the open market"

that is quintessential of neoliberal articulations of agency (A. Harvey & Fisher, 2015, p. 584, paraphrasing D. Harvey, 2007).

> Within the inequitable digital games industry, the resonance between neoliberalism and post-feminism can be seen to operate at the structural level where individualism supplants all notions of the social and political at the level of the subject in post-feminist discourse. This subject is necessarily autonomous, self-regulating, active, and freely-choosing, and it is female subjects in particular that are called upon to self-manage and self-discipline. This is the other side of the empowering message of the do-it-yourself movement; DIY implies individualism, flexibility, and a willingness to manage one's own skills accumulation and self-promotion with only the vaguest promise of recompense. (A. Harvey & Fisher, 2015, p. 585)

When this is the prevailing logic, it becomes the responsibility of women workers to mold themselves to the demands of the industry, regardless of the sacrificing it demands of them personally or professionally. And the so-called "Indie" entrepreneurship model must be held to account for the way in which it imposes upon workers the expectation of self-regulation along with the assumption of all the risk and precarity. Perhaps the most damning critique of this post-feminist reshaping of individualistic self-realization into a form of empowerment politics, sometimes called "choice feminism" (Crispin, 2017) is the way in which by turning all responsibility back on the subject, recast as "choice" it fails to account for the determining effects of race, class and other constraints on women's lived experiences, defaulting to the mobility and privilege of educated white middle and upper class white women as the norm.

An excellent example of this kind of "choice feminism" packaged for the masses and delivered from a pulpit enshrined within the high-tech, corporate world is Sheryl Sandberg's 2013 blockbuster title *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead.* Sandberg's call to arms for women professionals, direct from the C-suite, makes a claim on feminism but absent any analysis of race and class it reeks of neoliberal bootstrap ideology. Sandberg claims, "Conditions for all women will improve when there are more women in leadership roles giving strong and powerful voice to their needs and concerns." This echoes familiar post-feminist logic that more women on top = empowerment for all women (Sandberg, 2013, as quoted in hooks, 2013, para. 15) but as Black feminist scholar bell hooks explains in lengthy critical response to the book:

> This construction of simple categories (women and men) was long ago challenged by visionary feminist thinkers, particularly individual black women/women of color. These thinkers insisted that everyone acknowledge and understand the myriad ways race, class, sexuality, and many other aspects of identity and difference made explicit that there was never and is no simple homogenous gendered identity that we could call "women" struggling to be equal with men. In fact, the reality was and is that privileged white women often experience a greater sense of solidarity with men of their same class than with poor white women or women of color. (hooks, 2013, para. 6)

Without attention to concepts like intersectionality and other understandings of difference, which have been pioneered by feminist thinkers (particularly Black feminist theorists) over the past 50 years, projects which claim to empower women will inevitably privilege those in positions of relative power, i.e. white middle and upper class, educated, heterosexual,

cis women. But structural issues in the games industry, as in all of the corporate world and tech in particular, are more complex than a focus on binary gender alone can account for. Examining other axis of privilege and power in the games industry beyond gender reveals the deficits in the WIG framework as a project for empowering "women" without interrogating the diversity of women's experience and race is a particularly compelling example given the significant underrepresentation of some racial minorities in the games industry.

5.6 *Racism in the Games Industry*

As coverage of anti-Black racism in the mainstream media has grown in response to the highly televised deaths of unarmed Black victims of police violence over the past decade, sharply increasing during the Summer of 2020 following the death of George Floyd, the presence of racism within the games industry has also demanded increased attention. Following the protests in response to the death of Floyd many major corporate players in the games industry such as Microsoft, Sony, and Riot Games were outspoken advocates for racial justice on social media (H. Taylor, 2020).

However, it is unclear if these carefully packaged statements of support for the Black Lives Matter movement and for ending systemic racism have led to any tangible changes within these individual companies or the industry as a whole. The same companies proclaiming that "All lives will not matter until Black lives matter"(H. Taylor, 2020) are today still notorious for failing to contain virulent racism in the form of harassment and hate speech on their proprietary online platforms, as documented extensively by scholars such as Dr. Kishonna L. Gray and others (Gray, 2012, 2017, 2020; Higgin, 2015;

Nakamura, 2012). And the support for Black lives, doesn't apparently extend to employment opportunities, according to the IGDA's 2019 numbers, where the representation of Black/African-American/African/Afro-Caribbean professionals, was an extremely low, 2%, in contrast to the 2018 US census population data of which Black respondents made up 13% (*Developer Satisfaction Survey (DSS) – IGDA*, n.d.).

This stark lack of representation in the industry has of course not gone unnoticed by Black developers themselves. As founder and former AAA developer, Rashad Redic told TechCrunch in 2020, throughout his career he often experienced being "the only — or one of very few — Black guys among hundreds of game devs at a company" (Peckham, 2020). As Black producer Michael Anderson attests, diversity is not only lacking in a general sense, but in particular at the management and leadership level where some might claim it has the potential to be most influential. "My first job was the most diverse ever," he explains "and as I've progressed, [Black] people just gradually disappeared. So I'm like: wait, what's happened here" (Dealessandri, 2020)?

In addition to a lack of direct representation, the kind of racism minoritized players experience on online platforms has also been reported within some of the industry's most prominent companies. In 2018, allegations of homophobia, sexism and racism leveled against the French company, Quantic Dream's founder and president David Cage were covered extensively in European media. One of the most widely reported incidents involved Cage watching a video recording of a robbery that had taken place and jokingly asking an employee from Tunisia "Is this a cousin of yours" (Batchelor, 2018)?

However not all incidents of racism in industry spaces are blatant and subtle forms of discrimination can be equally problematic for those who find themselves subject to them. As Black founder and game director Cara Hillstock explains in a 2020 profile, covert racism, especially in the form of colleague's lack of confidence in a Black professional's skills or abilities, is a known issue and is exemplified by, "The lengths you have to go to prove you're competent, or to prove an idea you have is worthwhile, or that incorporating a certain diverse viewpoint is marketable and profitable, and therefore worthy." This kind of undermining she's experienced has even extended to others questioning her perspective on issues of race and representation and as she explains "there are many times where you have the responsibility of being like, "We can't put this in the game because it's bad." And a lot of times, people don't actually like to hear you out on that." (Jones, 2020b)

In addition to opposition from colleagues, companies themselves cannot be relied upon to be responsive to reports of racist behavior. For example when one European Ubisoft employee, inspired by the watershed of allegations regarding sexism in the company's North American studios, came forward to human resources about the behavior of senior developers who were calling each other by a racial slur, and negatively impacting himself and coworkers, he was told that this behavior was part of the culture of the studio and that the developers were "just being playful" (Sinclair, 2020).

Given that Black professionals in games are likely to face pushback when calling out incidents of racism in content or in the workplace, the onus should not be on developers of color to drive change within the industry, particularly given the structural barriers they already face. Again, this is the neoliberal logic of "add X and stir" which assumes that direct representation alone can do the heavy lifting of unwriting history or educating the

white majority about race and racism. As Black, UK based games industry professional Shay Thompson put it in an article with Gamesindustry.biz “White people in this industry, it is your job to fix this -- this isn't something I can fix. I have very little power” (Dealessandri, 2020).

5.7 What can WIGs Learn from Historic Feminist Communities?

Describing the persistence of anti-Black racism and the under representation of Black professionals in the games industry is to illustrate only one prominent dimension of the way inequality manifests in the games industry. Considered in tandem with the prevalence of sexist discrimination it makes for a powerful argument for the need to consider the intersectional nature of identity when undertaking any project focused on combatting inequality within game development. While WIG organizations must balance practical aims, ie producing educational programming that can deliver relevant high-tech skills and other forms of professional development, I believe that if their mission is to truly support equality they must embrace an intersectional feminist movement-building agenda that extends their focus beyond gender and their public programming beyond vocational training.

Charis’ decades long history as a feminist movement space devoted to challenging myriad forms of oppression is rooted in a tradition of coalition politics powerfully articulated in the writing of women of color feminists in the 1970s and 80s and beyond and in particular radical lesbians of color such as Bernice Johnson Reagon (Reagon, 2000) the Combahee River Collective (*The Combahee River Collective Statement*, 1978) Audre Lorde (G. A. Lorde, 1984) Gloria Anzaldúa (Anzaldúa, 1999) and Cherríe Moraga

(Moraga, 2015) among others. Challenging the notion of sisterhood put forth by the dominant paradigm of second wave feminism, defined largely by white liberal feminists, these authors argued instead for an intersubjective articulation of identity as complex rather than singular (Fowlkes, 1997). In doing so they demonstrated the need for building coalition across identity to effectively confront complex systems of oppression and privilege.

As an organization which formed in the 1970s and has long been multi-racial and lesbian Charis has acted as a physical base for creating a politically engaged feminist community. While Charis, like WIG organizations, has on the one hand a practical and straightforward purpose as a bookstore, their programming and interaction with the bookstore community through public events is one of active engagement in feminist coalition building. By drawing in diverse community members through not only the kind of public programming one might expect from a bookstore, by way of book launches and author readings, but also through consciousness raising and discussion groups, writing workshops, yoga classes and open mics, Charis engages with the radical project of intersectional feminist community building, using the bookstore as an incubator, not for enterprise but for radical discourse.

For WIG organizations to drive the kind of transformational change that is needed to cultivate sustainable diversity and equity in the games industry, they need to borrow from Charis' model in two critical ways. First, they need to embrace an intersectional understanding of identity to account for the myriad ways in which the industry perpetuates structural oppression, whether due to race, class, gender, sex and sexuality, disability or other facets of identity and experience. Secondly, they need to use the space and platform

created by their organizations to move beyond a focus on solely preparing members professionally and pursue intersectional feminist consciousness raising within their communities. By doing the former (i.e. extending their missions beyond a focus on sexist oppression alone) they can better serve those who exist within multiple identities that are subject to discrimination. By making consciousness raising work central to their mission alongside professional development they will create more durable, coalitional alliances between members of marginalized communities in which they can approach the project of liberation from multiple identities rather than being forced to default to womanhood as the common denominator for understanding their lived experiences. This is no easy feat as Bernice Johnson Reagon cautions in her famous essay, “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century” coalition spaces are not the “safe” “barred rooms” of singular identity-based organizing spaces (Reagon, 2000) but require tremendous work and sacrifice. “That is the nature of coalition,” she explains. “You have to give it all. It is not to feed you; you have to feed it. And it’s a monster. It never gets enough. it always wants more” (361). But to build alliances across identities that can lead to transformative change WIG projects need to do this kind of deep work of challenging the power structures both within their movement spaces, within the industry in which members work and within themselves. Coalition building is "…attempts to balance power relations and undermine and subvert the system of domination-subordination that affects even our most unconscious thoughts" (Anzaldúa, 2009).To truly embrace feminist coalition politics would change WIG projects from post-feminist capitalist projects to a radical feminist reimagining of the games industry as we know it. This this kind of reimagining could transform not only the conditions of work but also reshape the kind of games that are made into those that

represent the critical consciousness of their makers. Like the games I profiled in chapter III, games created by developers committed to an intersectional feminist politics of coalition could be designed to support players in pursuing social change and confronting systemic oppression in their own lives, acting as resources for feminist movement building.

5.8 *Encouraging Signs: Moving Towards Intersectionality*

While I realize that the likelihood that all the WIG projects I profiled will transform themselves into feminist coalition building projects of the radical nature that I've outlined here there are signs that in the years since I first conducted my informant interviews that some are in fact embracing a broader view of their responsibilities to movement building and in all cases, changes have been made in the way these organizations define themselves and their social change agendas. Each of the three organizations profiled have redefined their target audience with a mind to inclusion to varying degrees and some have created new programming that represents this shift towards a more intersectional understanding of the nature of identity. In the case of Girl Made Games, the goals of their project are very much in the spirit of the kind of engaged community building done by Charis.

Code Federation's 2021 self-described mission states that it is to "teach women, nonbinary, femme, and girl-identifying people to program using creativity as a pedagogical approach." While this shift in mission does not change the organization's focus on gender as an organizing framework, it does expand the spectrum of gendered expressions available to those the organization seeks to offer support to. This new mission makes clear that women who are cis-normative and present as female are not the only audience that Code Federation welcome to their classes and events but also non-binary individuals, femmes (a

feminine gender expression not tied to binary gender or conflated with either sex) and those who "identify" as girls, whether cis gendered or not (*About Us*, n.d.).

Voxelles 2021 "About" page explains that, "While committed to helping women in game dev, many of [our] programs and events are open to the community no matter your age, orientation, gender, or background – no experience or programming knowledge required!" While this is does not represent a shift in the nature of their programming or audience (at the time of my initial interview Voxelles already offered some events specifically for women and others which were open to all genders) and still puts a focus on gender in the game industry as their main site of intervention. However, the organization also announced a new program which took applications in January of 2021 for a "BIPOC Creator Program" offering "personally tailored mentorship and up to $10k CAD to BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and Person of Colour) Canadian game creators…" whether "solo devs or small diverse teams." The application overview does not mention gender therefore this program appears to be aimed at supporting non-white creators of any gender identity or expression, demonstrating the organizations commitment to supporting racially diverse game developers as part of its broader mission of "helping more people make and change games." This indicates that Voxelles views the struggle against racist discrimination and underrepresentation in the games industry as equally worthy of intervention as sexist discrimination (*Pixelles BIPOC Creator Program | Pixelles (Montreal)*, n.d.). Furthermore, Voxelle's extensive "Safer Space Policy" hints at the organization's intersectional understanding of the nature of identity in the way it addresses the multiple categories of identity and experience that may seek safety from harassment, stating that Voxelles is "…dedicated to providing a harassment-free space for everyone, regardless of

gender, gender identity + expression, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance, age, language, body size, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, socioeconomic standing, or otherwise" (*Safer Space Policy | Pixelles (Montreal)*, n.d.).

Of the three WIG organizations I profiled, Girl Made Games (now known simply by the acronym "GMG," a change which seems linked to their new branding as a "A space for queer and gender-marginalized people to create games freely" rather than an organization primarily oriented towards women) had made the most substantial changes to their organization's self-representation since my study began more than 6 years ago and as they remain the only organization that openly embraces feminism it is also clear from reading their current mission statement that, like Charis, they not only recognize the intersectional nature of identity but view their work as an explicitly political project. It reads:

- We believe game-making can be an act of resistance, giving creators ultimate agency in the expression of their identities, politics, selves, genders and sexualities. Our work has the power to transform our communities, and positively impact policies and practice.
- We believe that creating space and time to make and talk about games in an explicitly feminist context elevates the craft, amplifies alternative and diverse narratives, and supports the socio-cultural changes that are necessary to make game design accessible to all.
- We are interested in creating alternative forms of economic power grounded in solidarity, openness and collective values.

- We are committed to the ongoing work of anti-oppression, anti-racism and decolonization…
- We are committed to fostering an open and inclusive community space to make, play and talk about games not only as a refuge from and reaction to the harmful aspects of mainstream game culture, but also simply because games and the people who make them are important to us. (*DMG Toronto: DMG Toronto: About*, n.d.)

This series of statements makes clear the ways in which GMG leadership, like Charis, sees their practical aim of delivering game development education, professional development and other forms of public programming to members of the organization as connected to a range of social justice concerns, from diversity and accessibility to economic justice, anti-racism and decolonization. There is an explicit focus on games as a form of "resistance" and a tool for not only the personal expression of diverse voices but for bringing about change through their impact. Beyond communicating the capacity of games themselves, GMG's statement also emphasizes the importance of its "open and inclusive community" and indicates that fostering a community oriented towards feminist values, in contrast with the often problematic culture of mainstream games is part of their mission. Reviewing their extensive "resources" section, it is clear that as a non-profit organization GMG sees its responsibility to members and the public, extending beyond programming related to games and tech into the realm of mutual aid, community organizing and social action. Above a section of resources titled "Software & Tools" which lists dozens of development environments and programs for creating games is an equally lengthy section titled "Community & Activism" which ranges from links to anti-racist reading material to a

directory of “Toronto Black Owned Business & Black Entrepreneurs” and a section devoted specifically to causes seeking donations includes organizations such as Black Women in Motion, a survivor-led organization for black survivors of sexual violence and a link for making donations to 38 US community bail funds. At the bottom of the page a “Tools” section links to software for anonymizing photos taken at protests. Beyond offering these resources and links to help GMG community members engage in positive social action though, of note is a section devoted to practical “Covid-19 Relief” resources which touch on the needs and impacts of the pandemic of diverse community members within GMG and potentially the wider Toronto community as well. The list includes information on a slew of emergency grants and relief funding resources for Toronto based creatives to as well as resources for those facing food insecurity as well as health information related Covid-19 such as a hosted PDF on “Guidelines for Sex Workers, Clients, Third Parties, and Allies” by Butterfly Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Support Network and Maggie's Toronto Sex Workers Action Project.

5.9 Conclusion

At the time of my interview with GMG organizers in 2015 the organization had 220 members, now according to their site that number has grown to more than 650. With the size of their membership growing and changing it seems that the scope of GMGs mission has also expanded to fill a broader role as a hub of feminist community within the Toronto games and creative tech scene that not only sees itself as resource for technical skills and professional development but also advocates for justice across a broad range of social issues. To me this this strikes as a vital and innovative continuation of the legacy of feminist advocacy and organizing through inclusive movement spaces like Charis Books, where regardless of if you come for the books or the game-making workshop you’ll find a

community devoted to challenging and building solidarity with its members in the tradition of feminist coalition building.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

While it was outside the scope of this research project to look beyond the North American context of digital game production, in 2021, games are a truly global phenomenon. The ubiquity and accessibility of mobile technology has made play experiences accessible to the broadest and most diverse audience in history and according to current estimates its believed that more than three billion people or roughly forty percent of the world's population play games worldwide (Price, 2020). The global games industry is valued at more than $175 billion dollars, a figure that's likely to continue to grow in the coming years (Rousseau, 2021). Given the vast economic and cultural impact of games the world over, persistent and widespread inequality in the industry has far reaching implications.

Although my work in this manuscript only offers a snapshot of three organizations doing the important work of trying to increase the diversity and inclusivity of the games industry in the US, this is an enormous and complex project that dozens of organizations and hundreds of organizers are engaged in diverse ways. It is my hope that this research will inspire further research and interest in this area, encouraging others in academia and the industry to seek out the perspective of those doing this work on the ground and to learn from their strategies for uplifting and empowering those who are underrepresented in games. Continued attention to these projects and to the issues of inequality that plague both the games and broader tech industry is desperately needed and I'm optimistic that in an era in which there is increased public awareness of the ways that structural oppression shapes

our daily lives and livelihoods, we will only see interventionist projects, like those I've profiled here, continue to grow along with their influence.

While the games industry is global the organizations I've profiled here are local, they are grassroots, almost entirely volunteer-run and truly represent the power of what building community can accomplish. It is because of these aspects of their design, that I felt it was so important to bring them into conversation with historical predecessors in the form of feminist movement spaces. Like the WIG organizations I explored, the movement goals and accomplishments of community-based feminist organizations were built on the grassroots labor of individual feminist activists coming together in shared struggle. Organizations like Charis, that continue this movement work not have decades of accumulated experience holding space for it but also in growing it and allowing it to change and evolve as theory and politics and beliefs have changed. Charis itself is a 47-year-old institution and yet it remains one of the most radical and forward-thinking communities I have yet to encounter. Their endurance over half a century of organizing is a testament to their strength, flexibility and their capacity to innovate which I believe younger organizers such as myself owe it to ourselves to learn from.

In choosing to bring Charis into conversation with organizing efforts in the world of digital games, it is my hope that radical minds in tech whether organizers, designers or others in the industry will be inspired to connect their work to that of enduring movements for social justice and to both learn from and contribute back to them through their work with technology. By providing examples of digital games that facilitate and contribute to feminist movement building efforts it's my intent to offer one possible jumping off point for how technologists might imagine future collaborations with activist organizations.

Games also might be incorporated into capacity building in other crucial movement spaces like activist organizations involved in the struggle for Black lives, those fighting for trans rights or working to combat climate change to name just a few possibilities.

In the immortal words of Black lesbian feminist theorist, Audre Lorde "Revolution is not a one-time event. It is becoming always vigilant for the smallest opportunity to make a genuine change in established, outgrown responses" (Lorde, 1982). Those of us committed to working for social justice know that the work is always ongoing, always changing and that we must change with it. It is my hope that this research will not only inspire new uses of contemporary technologies like digital games for growing and supporting feminist and other progressive movements, but that in turn, those involved in organizing work within the world of games and tech will see new possibilities for collaboration with communities that have been doing the work for decades. That is what the future of feminist organizing looks like in the games industry.

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